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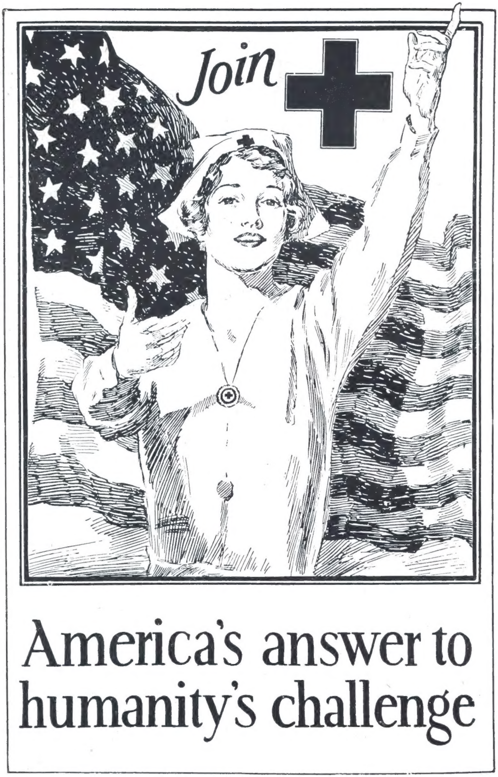
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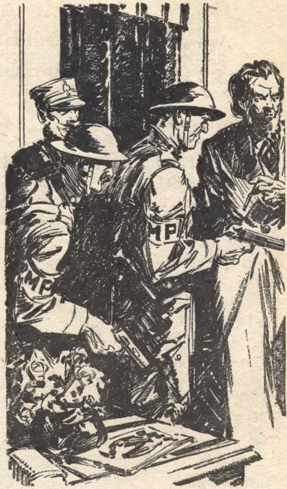
The HOUSE ON

A Novelette of the War Spies

By ARED WHITE



CHAPTER I

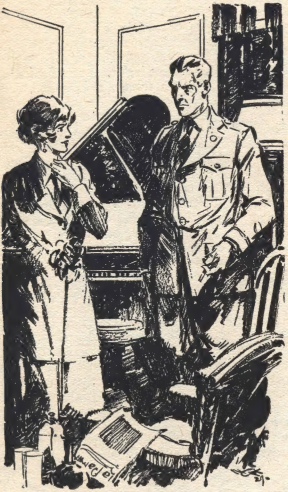
GERMAN CIPHER

THROUGH the long hours of the night Captain Fox Elton had wracked his weary brain upon the elusive key to the intercepted messages in German cipher, which he and Sergeant Walters had picked up in the wrecking of a spy nest in the environs of Belfort the day before. Tightly locked in those Teuton symbols lay the trail to another spy nest—one that had its roots fastened in the heart of Paris. Of that there could be no doubt, since one of the secret missives had confirmed the fact, had even told Elton rather clearly just where in Paris he might pick up the trail.

But since the others, once they yielded their secret, might add invaluable details to aid him in the quest at Paris, he suppressed his eagerness to start for the French metropolis and clung tenaciously to the stubborn puzzle.

One thing the unbroken cipher messages already had told him—the German agents in Paris employed a far higher order of caution and intelligence than the nest of Germans he had trapped on the frontier at Belfort. Those captives had been little more than cipher couriers, a nest of spy runners who had wormed their way into the American ranks and depended upon the American uniform to cover them from suspicion. Trapping them had been simple enough once he had

RUE CARNOT



CIPHERS IN SHEET MUSIC, IN INNOCENT APPEARING PHOTOGRAPHS, AND IN THE PETALS OF FLOWERS—CAPTAIN FOX ELTON, OF THE MILITARY INTELLIGENCE, HAD SOLVED THEM WITH PRECISION. BUT NOW CAME THE MOST MYSTERIOUS MESSAGE OF ALL . . .

the trail. But the agents of Paris who wrote cipher reports must need be trained observers, and therefore creatures of nerve, alertness and resource. The fullest information of their activity would be small enough advantage in the hazardous feat of stalking them to their lair.

Reveille sounded in the enlisted quarters out beyond the great stone enclosure that walled in the American military headquarters buildings. Elton heard the trumpeting of the sunrise only vaguely, working close over his desk under the glare of an electric light, unconscious that the bright light of day poured in through his window. Not even the staccato notes of mess call reminded him that he had missed his supper on the evening before and ought to be ravenously hungry. The mystery was yielding now — stubbornly, a letter at a time, and he continued the struggle eagerly.

The elusive Hun messages were set down in the guise of sheet music in miniature. On inspection by an inexpert eye they would have passed as the notes of a composer. They were written in a very small hand on thin flimsy, evidently with the aid of a fine point ball pen so as to preserve their distinctness after having been wadded into compact pellets.

There were, in all, four closely written sheets of this cipher, each sheet the size of an ordinary postcard. They had occupied four large quinine capsules which Elton and Walters had taken from the pockets of a German military agent, disguised as an American captain, who operated the relay of messages from Belfort through the Swiss border. There were five of the capsules, the fifth one containing a simpler cipher message of a vintage which Elton had been able to break readily into plain English. Deciphered, it read—

ROUTE 20 CARNOT

The purport of that brief legend had not been difficult to run down. The message meant literally just what it said, as Elton concluded after rummaging through various and sundry French maps. A detail map of the great city of Paris had given point to the word "Carnot." The fact that extremely simple cipher had been used indicated that the message had been addressed merely to a Teuton messenger who must carry his cipher key about with him in his head. Therefore, Elton had amplified the message to read, 'Route these messages to No. 20 Rue Carnot, Paris.'

As for the messages in music, Elton had identified them readily as a form of alphabet cipher. The fact that there were five kinds of notes used, in alternating groups of from one to six, left no room for doubt as to that. And they had been arranged with such skill as to carry a tune, as Elton found by humming a few bars—although music had no part in the messages themselves. Merely a cover-up in event of capture, Elton concluded; another evidence of German thoroughness in waging war.

By the high frequency of their occurrence in the messages, Elton had deciphered the quarter notes into the letter E—the letter that appears more often than any other in ordinary usage. The half notes had yielded the letter T, the eighth notes O and the sixteenth notes N.

His problem thereafter was one of patient experimentation—an unending arrangement and rearrangement of the letters of the alphabet into six horizontal columns until he hit upon the precise arrangement that had been agreed upon by the German secret agents. An interminable task unless chance favored him, and so far luck had not perched itself upon his busy pencil.

SO COMPLETELY absorbed was Elton in his quest that he failed to note the opening of his door and the entry of a soldier bearing a steaming tray. After standing unobserved in front of the captain's desk for several moments, the soldier set the tray down in front of the young officer. Elton jumped as the tension of his nerves was broken by the interruption. He looked up sharply, but his face softened into a friendly smile of welcome at sight of the veteran Sergeant Walters.

"I must be getting jumpy, Sergeant," he greeted the non-com. "You startled me out of a year's growth."

"If it's the hair on the Cap'n's face I've startled out of growing any longer, I've done a fine service, sir." Walters grinned. "Sure and headquarters would never forgive the Cap'n that stubble—even if he caught all the spies in France."

Elton rubbed his face sheepishly.

"Gosh, I'm glad you reminded me of that," he replied soberly. "I'd even forgot for the time being that I was in the Army. It was good of you to bring me something to eat, Sergeant. I'm starving, although I feel guilty at having you cart food in to me."

"Yes, sir, and I feel guilty bringing it in," said Walters. "I don't like dog-robbing—and the Cap'n's the only one I'd do it for—and only for the Cap'n so's to keep you from starving yourself to death. I've also brought the Cap'n's shaving outfit."

"Thanks, Walters. You are eternally saving my worthless life in one way or another."

"It's a pleasure helping the Cap'n," smiled Walters, "that is, when I can do it with a gun instead of a dish tray. Does it look like another live trail, sir?"

"No doubt of it. Paris this time—the way it shapes up."

Walter's gray-green eyes gleamed, his wind burned face quickened into lively anticipation.

"Leaving soon, sir?" he demanded.

Elton groaned and shook his head in misery.

"God knows, Walters. I've got to get to the bottom of these four Hun puzzles first, and that may keep me busy juggling letters for a week. All I've gotten so far is their address in Paris."

"What more'n that do we need, sir?" Walters put in quickly.

"But this isn't going to be any set of witless squareheads, Sergeant. When we go into Paris we're dealing with the big league Prussians and we need every bit of information we can get. It'll pay to wait until I've found out what this fake music is all about. Then maybe we can give the Prussians a little music of our own to dance to."

Their early morning *tête-à-tête* was interrupted by the entry of Colonel Rand, the new chief of counter-espionage activity. The colonel's impatience broke into words, without the formality of greeting, the moment the door was closed behind him.

"Well, what's the answer, Captain?" he demanded sharply.

"I've made some progress, sir," Elton reported, bolting a mouthful of half chewed toast, and rising. "I think I've verified the location of a spy nest in Paris. But there's four of—"

The colonel's eyes had narrowed into an astounded scrutiny of his star cipher operative. He broke in sharply:

"Captain, are you growing a beard? Just how do you explain the unwonted stubble that decorates your face this morning?"

Elton's hand made a guilty sweep across his face.

"No, sir. The fact is I have been too busy to think of shaving since day before yesterday."

"Well, let's see that it doesn't happen again," said the colonel, reluctantly passing the sin whose detection had been a part of his daily routine for many years as a company officer before the war. "Now proceed with your report."

"As I was saying, sir," Elton proceeded, concealing his amusement at the interruption, "there are four messages—ones we took out of quinine capsules—which I haven't unraveled yet. But I think it's important to keep right on—"

"How much longer do you estimate for the job, Captain?" Colonel Rand broke in incisively.

"I can't say. It might take an hour, two hours, a day or a week. The principal thing is that I'm on the right trail now, and I'm sure I can break the messages down if given time."

"Exactly what I feared," said the colonel. "Time is too important a factor to waste in this case."

"I'm making haste slowly but surely, sir," Elton rejoined.

"Does it occur to you, Captain," Colonel Rand inquired bruskly, "that the Germans are fully aware that we broke up their nest in our lines—and that they will warn their agents in Paris that these messages fell in our hands?"

"But, sir, the Germans will never credit us with intelligence enough to find out what they mean. Why, they even believe to this day that their Nauen radio code is unbreakable, yet the British have had the key for the past six months."

"I'm not interested in abstract theory," said Colonel Rand dryly. "What we want is results, and since you haven't got to the bottom of that cipher yet, I have a way of my own to suggest."

"Very good, sir. I'll need all the help I can get if I'm to beard the Prussians in their Paris lairs. May I ask what the Colonel has to offer?"

The counter-espionage chieftain sat down. He crossed his legs and looked intently at Elton.

"Had it occurred to you that that bogus Captain Streib you captured so neatly at Belfort yesterday might be able to assist us? As I understand your report, he was the brains of the spy nest on the border. Do you not think he could tell us a great deal, if properly approached?"

"Hardly so, I'd say. He knows he's due for a firing squad and is not likely to be in a very cheerful or helpful mood."

"A peculiarly shrewd, cold blooded and conscienceless scoundrel, is he not?"

Elton laughed grimly.

"By a miracle of good fortune and fast thinking, plus the valuable aid of Sergeant Walters, I am still alive to testify to those characteristics in his makeup."

"Then isn't it altogether probable that we could work up a little deal with him—buy him for an attractive consideration, for instance?"

"But a man who is about to face a firing squad probably would find little appeal in any sum we might offer him, I would think."

Colonel Rand leaned intently across the captain's desk.

"But the closer a knave of that kind is to death," said the colonel through compressed lips, "the more eager he is to barter for—his own life."

"You mean sir, to let Streib escape a firing squad, after he's murdered several of our men, in addition to spying in American uniform?"

"Murder," rejoined Colonel Rand, "is an adaptable term. It is especially difficult to define in time of war. Besides, information that will give us a netful of Boche operatives is more valuable to the Allied cause just now than the life of this poor rat, Streib. Do you not agree?"

"I'm not thirsty for the hyena's blood, even if he did try to lure me into eternity," answered Elton reflectively. "If he can give us any useful information, I'd say it was a justifiable barter."

"Excellent," responded Rand. "I wanted you to feel that way about it since you are the logical one to assist me in loosening his tongue. I already have the necessary authority to strike such a bargain with the jackal."

The colonel glanced at Sergeant Walters.

"You will proceed at once, Sergeant, to the office of the commandant," he ordered, "and have Streib brought here under proper guard for question."

CHAPTER II

BLIND ALLEY

HALF an hour later the prisoner was marched into the room, securely manacled between two armed guards. Two bayoneted squads trailed in formation close behind. Colonel Rand dismissed the guards from the room and placed a chair for Streib. The Prussian captive's eyes were bloodshot; his cold, thin face was set and pallid. Replacing the sleek tailored uniform of an American captain of Infantry, in which guise he had been trapped by Elton, Streib now appeared in rough blue denims, faded and ill fitting, upon the left breast of which was stamped the humiliating P. G. that proclaimed the wearer a prisoner of war.

Matted hair and two days' growth of black stubble completed the wretched picture of the once elegant Streib. But there was an air about the fellow that was not effaced by the rough prison garb, an air of self-discipline, of superiority to circumstance; and in his red rimmed eyes there burned the restrained but unmistakable light of an arrogant defiance.

"Will you have a cigaret?" Colonel Rand inquired of the prisoner, by way of putting Streib at ease at the beginning of the interview.

"Thank you, my Colonel. You are very kind," Streib replied in a cold, metallic voice. He bared his teeth in a smile at the colonel's proffered cigaret case and glanced down at his own heavily manacled wrists. "But I find myself somewhat inconvenienced in accepting your kind hospitality, sir."

Colonel Rand placed a cigaret in the prisoner's mouth and lighted it, a shadow of a smile flitting across the Prussian's face at sight of the tremor in the American's hand. The colonel drew his chair directly in front of the other and proceeded bluntly with his mission.

"Streib, you must realize that we have sufficient evidence to convict you of espionage," he said quietly.

"Rather a leading question," said Streib calmly. "Surely you wouldn't expect me to jeopardize any chance I may have of justice by an affirmative answer to such a question."

"The evidence speaks for itself, Streib. You were caught by Captain Elton practically in the act of relaying enemy cipher messages from the front lines while masquerading in American uniform. We have one of the messages reduced to English; and you had four others in those capsules which were taken from your own pockets by Captain Elton, here. There is a mass of evidence from which you can not hope to escape."

"Since you are so convinced, my dear Colonel, why should we discuss the matter further? I, of course, hold to the claim that I am innocent—if it is a confession you are aiming at."

"Now see here, Streib. In addition to espionage charges, the temper of the court will not be improved by the evidence of your murders—three American soldiers who stood in your way—"

"Pardon, sir," Streib broke in rather sharply. "But assuming the correctness of your charge that I am a German operative, then is it murder to do away with those who stand in the way of duty? Does not such a statement incriminate rather a large number of gentlemen who are engaged in the present amiable armed dispute?"

"Let's not equivocate, Streib," Colonel Rand cut back. "The point I make is that nothing can save you from a firing squad —or the gallows, as a court may elect." The colonel leaned close to the Prussian and added in a low, tense voice, "I said nothing could save you—I meant only one thing can save you."

Streib worked the cigaret with his tongue but there was no change in the expression of cold reserve in which his features were set.

"May I trouble the Colonel?" he replied, with an annoyed glance at the cigaret. "The paper is stuck to my lower lip, and since I am without the use of my hands it is rather annoying."

It was not until he had taken the cigaret that Rand caught the superb arrogance of the other's act. He threw the cigaret to the floor with an impatient snap of his fingers.

"Thank you, my friend," smiled Streib. "You are very kind."

"I speak with authority, Streib," snapped Rand. "I am not here to temporize with you, nor to waste my own valuable time. I have a proposition to present to you and it'll be your last chance. Please bear that in mind!"

"I am entirely at the Colonel's pleasure, sir," said Streib very soberly.

"You have very valuable information which we want, Streib," the colonel proceeded with blunt directness. "It is, in fact, more valuable to us than your life. So, weighing things, I'm willing to offer you an unusual bargain. You give us the information we want, and in return for that we give you your life."

"A commutation of sentence to life imprisonment, I take it, sir?"

"A commutation of the death sentence. Doubtless at the end of the war all prisoners will be released, so life imprisonment hardly would follow."

"What is it you think I could say that is of such great value to you?"

"You must know, Streib, the location of a lot of German agents—their haunts, habits, methods, and the best methods of trapping them."

Streib's gray eyes narrowed and he made a futile effort to cross his manacled legs.

"Assuming that I am what you accuse me of being, no doubt I would know all you suggest—and perhaps a great deal more, my Colonel."

"Excellent." Colonel Rand moved closer, pressing the advantage closely. "Captain Elton, here, knows just what information we want you to divulge. Give us that information in detail, Streib, and I guarantee you officially that you will not be executed. I am in a position to guarantee you your life."

"First, may I trouble you for another cigaret?" Streib asked coolly.

The colonel eagerly complied with the request. He emptied his case into a pocket of the prisoner's denims.

"I purposely asked that you be denied tobacco until this interview was ended," he smiled. "But hereafter that will not be necessary. You shall have plenty to smoke."

"Thank you, sir," said Streib. "And now may I ask the Colonel one simple question?"

"Why, certainly. Speak freely, Streib."

"Assuming—just assuming, my Colonel, that you were a prisoner of the German army—would you betray your country and your countrymen just to save your own immediate hide from the worms?"

"See here, Streib!" Colonel Rand was on his feet, his face blood red.

Streib arose, collectedly, with splendid poise, and said in a clear, sharp voice:

"Ah, I take it you would not, my Colonel. Then what right have you to insult a Prussian with such a foul suggestion? If you have finished with this outrage, kindly return me to my cell. I have nothing more to say to you."

WITH a furious jerk of his hand, Colonel Rand ordered Streib removed from the room. He stood at the window, with his back to the room, until the insolent and imperturbable Streib, calmly smoking the American cigaret, was taken out. Then he turned to Elton, his cheeks still flaming from the humiliating interview.

"Maybe he'll think better of his insolence, when the court sentences him to the rope," the colonel said disagreeably. "He must think he can put it over on a court."

"I hardly think so, sir," Elton replied. "I thought I read what was coming when he came into the room. He knows what's in store for him and I'm betting that he has that arrogant smile of his for the men who execute him. Streib is a Prussian, sir, of the military type. He'll die like a man, in the line of duty, and we'll get nothing out of him but a sneer."

"Well," muttered the colonel dubiously, "if you're right it'll give me a new slant on the breed."

"I've learned something new, too, sir," said Elton soberly. "I've learned that our game is even a tougher one than I thought it was, since these Hun secret agents seem to hold their lives as lightly as the men in the trenches."

Colonel Rand groaned.

"It's a hard jolt to me that Streib wouldn't trade—and us with a haul in Paris right in our grasp." He shook his head sadly. "Well, what do you suggest now?"

"The ciphers, sir. That's one German weakness which always plays into our hands—even if it is a bit slow at times."

"But haven't you broken one message down and got an address to put you on the trail?"

"Yes—an address. But that mightn't mean much unless we had some hint of what was going on there. It might be a message center, an information assembly point, a rendezvous for spy runners, or heaven knows what. And if we had to shadow the place without knowing just what we looked for, it might only scare them to cover. They're not dumb enough, nor incautious enough, that they don't know when they're being watched."

The colonel rubbed his wrinkled forehead—his favorite gesture when he was struggling for a decision. At the end of several minutes he cast aside his uncertain manner and announced his conclusion.

"I'll give you forty-eight hours more on those Prussian puzzles," he exclaimed. "If you haven't gotten anywhere by then, we'll have to do the best we can by moving in on that Paris nest. In the meantime I'll have Streib's trial rushed through, and see what'll happen when he's flush up against the real thing."

Under this ultimatum, Elton turned back to his desk the moment his superior left the room. Sergeant Walters, who had remained a wax figure in a corner of the room during the interview with Streib, stirred to life.

"Sir, I suppose the Cap'n's shaving water's got cold, and it's up to the Cap'n's special dog-robber to get some hot water." The sergeant smiled. "I'm doing it to save the Cap'n's time."

"Thank you, Walters," Elton rejoined. "It may be a new experience, but you're about to observe an officer shave in cold water. That'll save some time over your plan. You see, I don't believe in prolonging the war unnecessarily—and besides, I may need every second of that forty-eight hours the colonel gave me."

"With all due respect to the Cap'n's judgment, sir," said Walters, "I'm thinking the colonel's right in wanting to jump that trail while it's nice and hot."

"And with all due respect to you, Walters, and to the colonel," smiled Elton, "your own trouble is you're always spoiling for quick action; and the colonel's always spoiling for quick results. Between the two of you I have a time of it trying to apply common sense and a bit of reason."

"Well, sir, what's itching at me," said Walters fervently, "after hearing that bird Streib sound off, I'm wanting to show some of them we got plenty of fighting guts of our own."

"A fine spirit, Sergeant," Elton said between grim strokes of a dull safety razor. "Too fine a spirit to waste upon an enemy firing squad as poor Streib is doing—and all because of a bit of loose thinking on his part the other day. Please remember that while his courage is magnificent, his plight only reminds us that discretion is the better part of valor, as the old saying goes. Let's profit by it."

"I hope the Cap'n didn't get the notion I was trying to argue with him," Walter rejoined quickly. "Sure and until the Cap'n is ready to move on Paris, I'm happy to stand by and do my job of dog-robbing so you won't let them Hun ciphers starve you to death, sir."

THE HOURS that followed were hours of triumph for the mysterious German war ciphers. As the day ticked heavily by, the messages withheld their mute evidence of Teuton war intrigue behind the Allied battle lines. From time to time Elton moved back from his littered desk to shake his head in tantalized perplexity. But each time that he settled back, a furtive glance at the moving hands of his wrist watch sent him instantly into the struggle again.

There was no doubt in his mind that he dealt with nothing more than a jumbled form of substitution ciphers. The key, then, could lie in but one place—in the arrangement of the alphabet in jumbled horizontal columns. But over and over again he had arranged the letters endlessly, until the floor about his desk was banked deep in crumpled sheets of note paper. Several times during the day his pulse had risen in the thought that at last he had found the secret setup, only to have his task of reducing the message end in meaningless words.

At the outset of his labors he had established the letter E as being represented by the cipher symbol of quarter notes in the sheet music. The frequency of their appearance made his conclusion logical since E is the letter most frequent in ordinary use and therefore may be identified by its recurrence in any guise. On the same accepted theory of cipher breaking, the second most popular letter is T, which was indicated by the half notes; the third, fourth and fifth order of high frequency letters A, O and N were disclosed in like manner. With these letters he had written out part of the first German message:

E—O—T—TA—E—NN——
E—T——EE——N

But beyond that he was unable to make progress. Not a single intelligible word was he able to evolve either by random filling in of the blank spaces in the line or by applying other letters as they appeared in his alphabetic table.

At dusk Sergeant Walters reappeared, bearing the captain's supper. He saw that the lunch which he had brought in remained barely touched—had been transferred from the desk to the floor. Elton ignored the sergeant's presence, an indication, not merely that he was completely absorbed in his work, but that he did not wish to be disturbed. The sergeant deliberately placed the tray on the table.

"You're taking time out for supper," he announced stoutly. "Them Boche puzzles ain't worth working yourself to death over."

"Thanks, Sergeant," said Elton, starting at the interruption and then relaxing gratefully. "Sound of your voice reminds me that I could eat a bite to advantage."

"Any luck, sir?"

"I'm just where I was this morning, I fear, Walters. But I hope during the night—"

"You're not meaning to say you carry on again tonight, sir!" Walters voice was one of protest. "If you let these Boche puzzles break you instead of you breaking them, who wins this little game—us or the Huns?"

"Oh, I am good for a long time yet," Elton smiled back. "In war, a man with a job to do hasn't any right to think of himself so long as he's able to stick on by the skin of his teeth."

"It ain't much sleep the Cap'n's had in the past week," said Walters dolefully. "And maybe the Boches have put one over this time that just can't be broke. Did you think of that?"

"Impossible, Walters. There's no cipher ever invented that, given time, can't be broken down. The worst of it is, this one seems to be nothing very deep or very complicated. It's just a queer jumble of some sort—based on the alphabet, as most all ciphers are—and I'll have it sooner or later."

"Well, I'm not putting nothing past the Boches," Walters muttered. "It'd be just their style to make one look easier than it was, just to tie up our cipher experts. I don't know nothing about these puzzles, but I do know there's no trick too fast for the kaiser's gang."

"Well, I'll try to have better news for you in the morning Walters. And if I do get through in the night, I promise to turn in and get some sleep before we start for Paris."

"But you're seeing me at midnight," protested Walters. "Sure, I'm reporting it at twelve with hot coffee. It's little enough, and I'm only sorry there's nothing more I can do to help the Cap'n just now, sir."

"Thank you again, Walters. I'm lucky to be under your excellent guardianship—" Elton lifted his coffee cup in the manner of one who delivers a toast—"and here's hoping you get in on your share of the big job ahead of us—down in Paris."

BUT IT developed a moment later that the faithful Walters already had played something much bigger than a menial rôle in the spy quest. As the sergeant left and Elton settled back for a moment of relaxation before coming again to grips with the cipher, there rose in his jaded mind the comment upon German army trickery. The thought, which had escaped his own weary head, grew into an accepted possibility. But what trickery could they put into a mere substitution cipher—since the trick, unless very simple, might also foil their own agents in France?

He remembered that, easy as it had been to decipher the broken message that gave the Paris address, it had been slightly jumbled. The fact had escaped his serious consideration at the time. There had been several meaningless letters in that phrase of three words, "Route 20 Carnot"—but these he had lined out as nothing more than an error in enciphering. He reached for the message and examined it minutely. It read:

EEBHHGR GGJRAEGL PNEABGG

In the three hours that he had spent in reducing that cipher, chance had favored him. Recognizing it at the outset as a form of straight substitution cipher, he had set to work on the theory that since it must be intended for spy couriers or message runners, its key would be simple, since the type of agent used in such work would hardly be able to grapple with an intricate form of cipher. Something less than fifty trials finally had yielded him the key—a circumstance in which good fortune played a major rôle since his high-frequency letter table could not play an important part in a message of such brevity. It was, too, a deft trick the Germans had used in this, simple as the message was once the key became known. A division of the alphabet into two horizontal lines:

A B C D E F G H I J K L M
N O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z

Each letter in this simple cipher did double duty. The letters on the upper line were symbols for those on the second line, and the second line letters were symbols for those on the first line. Thus A pointed to the letter directly under it, N; while N reciprocated by symbolizing the letter above it, A. Similarly, B meant O and O meant B wherever they appeared in the cipher message. Elton went through the process of deciphering the message of three words again.

EEBHHGR GGJRAEGL PNEABGG
RROUUTE TTWENRTY CARNOTT

In the first zeal of finding the key, Elton had lined out the superfluous letters, barely noticing them since they had no place in the message. He had smiled at what he had taken as a crude effort at complicating the cipher by adding a few extra letters. Then he had dismissed the matter as possibly due to haste or error, without pausing to reflect that neither sin was a part of German military thoroughness.

Now they loomed up at him with a new significance—as being something more than chance. A few minutes study and he thought he saw a new German ruse—a system of nulls, or meaningless symbols, scattered through the message to increase the frequency of obscure letters of the alphabet.

With this possibility he turned eagerly back to the music cipher. Had the same system been applied to that? Had low-frequency letters such as J, X and Z been scattered through the message as nulls to protect the secret against prying eyes in event of capture? A sharp ruse; one that confounded the high-frequency letter tables and put the most expert worker in ciphers at sea, at least until he saw through such a trick. Small wonder, if this was the game, that he had been mulling endlessly over the bogus letters in his unfilled line. Instead of indicating the letter E, groups of quarter notes might mean nothing—and the half notes, appearing so frequently in the score, seved as nulls as well as representing the letter T.

CHAPTER III

FOX ELTON—WELFARE WORKER

WHEN Sergeant Walters appeared soon after reveille of the next morning bearing another steaming tray, it was to find Captain Elton's room vacant. The litter on the floor had grown into a veritable sea of crumpled paper. But the surface of the desk was orderly, an indication that the occupant had not left hastily or merely stepped from the room. Elton came in a moment later, his keen blue eyes beaming through the black rings about them.

"I took your advice, after all, Sergeant, and got a good sleep," he announced. He stretched himself and rubbed his temples briskly. "But I sometimes wonder if a little sleep isn't worse than none, judging by the way I feel after a five-hour turn at the blankets."

"Then you—you broke it down, sir?" exclaimed Walters, his words an exultation rather than a query.

"What makes you think that, Walters?" Elton rejoined soberly. "I have a full day and night yet at my disposal under the colonel's generous time allowance."

"Sure, sir, and the Cap'n'd never have went to bed unless he'd finished that job," gloated Walters. "And did the

Cap'n find something worth looking for tucked away in that Boche music?"

"Rather," said Elton. "But we have no time to spare now. I've my musette bag packed. And you'd better get what things you'll need for a prolonged stay in Paris, as it'll be no overnight lark."

"I've my toothbrush, razor and comb in my pockets, sir." Walters grinned. "That's baggage enough for a soldier. I'm ready to move now."

"As soon as I've reported developments to the colonel, we start," said Elton.

Since the chief of the counter espionage section, being a high staff officer with many assistants, hardly would be expected to appear at his official desk before the leisurely hour of 8 A.M, Elton hurried to Colonel Rand's billet in the village. His one thought now was to reach Paris as soon as possible. An early morning start would land him at the French metropolis in ample time for a daylight reconnaissance of the situation, and leave the night free for more important operations.

The colonel was up, having his morning chocolate and rolls in a luxurious easy chair while an orderly put a high polish on his cordovan riding boots, silver spurs and English Sam Browne belt in preparation for the day at a headquarters desk.

"What luck this time, Captain?" he half yawned. "You are here to report results—or ask for help?"

"I've deciphered these messages, sir," said Elton. "Or rather, I should say, the message, since they all dovetail into one communication."

"Anything of much importance?" the colonel queried.

"The Colonel may judge for himself, sir," said Elton.

It was with a leisurely hand that the counter espionage chieftain took the sheet of paper bearing the deciphered message. But before he had finished reading the first sentence he was stirring into life. In another moment he was bolt upright in his chair, and before he had finished the message he was on his feet, shaken completely out of his early morning lethargy by what he read. Elton had pieced the message into a harmonious whole, on the single sheet of paper, and where necessary for clarity had added a word of his own. The document read:

> Deliver this to No. 20, Rue Carnot, Paris.
>
> Imperative we have following information: Details, with map locations, of vital defenses of Paris. Present location French massed reserves. Location of principal arsenals capable of being bombed. Report of effect on morale of our cannon fire on Paris. Verify reported friction between British, American and French over supreme Allied command. Verify report French government being moved Paris to Bordeaux. Accurate estimate of peace sentiment in French Chamber of Deputies. Use every endeavor to increase submarine targets. This of greatest importance with special attention to American troop and supply ships. Verify number American effectives now in France. Report by radio as progress made. Funds being cabled your credit from America usual channel.—VON GLUCK.

"Rather a large sized order," said Colonel Rand with an effort at composure. It was his proudest claim that nothing shook him off his balance—other than stupidity on the part of his assistants. There was, nevertheless, a tremor in his voice and the sheet of paper crackled under the involuntary twitching of his fingers. "An even larger trail than I thought we were on, Captain."

"I thought we'd be justified in waiting to find out what was at the other end of the game," said Elton.

"Addressed to the greatest spy nest in all Europe, eh?" said Colonel Rand dramatically. "It occurs to me we should call the French in on this and work with them from the beginning."

"Probably addressed to a vital espionage center," said Elton thoughtfully. "But addressed through a distribution or message center of some sort, according to my thoughts in the matter. I will be satisfied to find at the end of our trail a clearing house for Prussian messages—the capture of which will put a hard crimp in their work, and may put us on other important trails."

"The French will probably have some hint of this place which we may find valuable, as I've suggested. Although just now they're up to their ears trying to locate a radio sending station that the Boche has set up right under their noses in Paris."

"I'm opposed, sir, to calling them in unless it becomes necessary later on. We've worked the case out so far without their aid, and these cipher messages were captured inside our own lines."

"This case looks to me too important to take any chances on, Captain Elton," the colonel said severely. "What is it you propose doing?"

"Make an immediate reconnaissance, sir. See what it looks like on the ground. Then if we need help or information which we can't get, take the French in on the chase."

Colonel Rand paced the floor while he thought this over. After all, he remembered, he would be held responsible if the case should be bungled. There might be some very sharp comment from French G. Q. G. if the French Second Section received no report of the situation—especially since the French capital and French army were so heavily involved in the Prussian demands for secret reports. On the other hand, he would get the full glory if one of his assistants succeeded in an audacious invasion of German spy haunts in Paris. There could be no harm, he concluded, in a survey of the situation.

"Go ahead, then, and make your own reconnaissance," he commanded. "But remember that it is my orders for you to consult the French Second Section chief at Paris if the trail gets too hot, or you find you're in over your depth."

"Very good, sir; I understand."

"Now then, since we've got that settled —what do you need in the way of men and a setup?"

"Sergeant Walters, sir, as usual, and *carte blanche* in selecting my own driver. Also, I'd like to have three trusted men from Paris headquarters meet me at the Hotel Greville at Montrouge, just outside of the city, sir. Of the three, one must be dressed as a French taxi driver, and must have a French taxicab. He should be sixty-eight inches high and weigh about one hundred and fifty pounds. If they'll take rooms and wait for us, we'll be there as soon as possible. Here's a memo I've drawn up on it, sir."

"An odd mixture you're asking for." Colonel Rand smiled. "But I'll phone Paris personally and have it taken care of exactly as you've written it down. When do you figure on making a start?"

"Immediately, sir. I'll be in Paris before noon."

IN PRESENTING to the headquarters auto pool his request for military transportation, Elton asked the assignment as driver of Private Sands, graduate into the wartime Army from the wheel of a New York taxicab. And under Sands' skilful and daring guidance the military car flashed by the Bois de Vincennes an hour short of noon and roared into Paris.

At the Rue de Dijon they turned to the left across the Seine at the Pont Tolbiac, and proceeded at more leisurely speed south and west to the Avenue Chatillon along which they left the city again and entered Montrouge, just outside the gates. Here they left their car in front of the ancient Hotel Greville and engaged rooms. This done, Elton quickly located the room occupied by the three Americans who were to meet him there. Colonel Rand had performed his part of the task well. The men were waiting, as directed.

Elton's interview with them was brief. First he had the one who wore French taxi garb exchange with Private Sands—the two being of a size, thanks to Elton's forethought. Then he dismissed the three, bidding them take his automobile, leave the French taxi behind and return to Paris headquarters where they were to forget the incident. As soon as the men left the room, Elton opened a canvas squad bag which he had brought along, extracted two olive drab uniforms and handed one to Walters.

The sergeant groaned aloud at sight of the garb.

"You meaning for me to dress up in this outfit, sir?" he cried.

"Why not?" laughed Elton. "You'll observe that I'm putting on the mate to it."

"And me a able bodied fighting man with nineteen years' service and three wound chevrons!" wailed Walters. "Sure, sir, if this is a disguise, nobody's ever going to take me for any Army welfare worker—not if I wore two of these welfare uniforms and a sign on top of that."

"Anyhow, you'll not be called upon to function in that capacity, Walters. Not unless you want to try your hand at reforming yourself."

After engaging rooms at the Hotel Greville for a week, Elton led the way to the French taxi and, with Sands installed in his new rôle at the wheel, they reentered Paris, proceeded up the Boulevard St. Michel, across the Seine, and finally turned into the Rue de Rivoli where they selected a quiet café and ordered luncheon. During the meal Elton carefully plotted, for the benefit of Private Sands, the route to the Rue Carnot.

It was a brief ride to the Rue Carnot. As they turned off the Avenue Philippe-Auguste into Carnot, Elton saw that it was a conventional residential street built up, wall-like, to the cobblestone sidewalks. The houses were two and three story structures of stone and mortar which had served many generations, and there was a distinct air of somber respectability about the street that offered small hint of war intrigue.

He had instructed Sands to drive very slowly on entering the street, until he had an opportunity to pick up the house numbers. His immediate plan was both simple and safe. Merely that of driving past the suspected rendezvous, noting its precise location and environs, and garnering any other information that might present itself from the appearance of the place. Thereafter he would be ready to complete his plan of gaining entrance to the house.

But as the street numbers mounted slowly to twenty, Elton's alert eyes were met by a wholly unexpected sight. No. 20 was nothing more than a black mass of ruins—victim of one of the German Big Berthas which had demolished the stone front wall and reduced the place to a grimacing skeleton of a house.

Twice he had Sands drive past the pile in the hope that he might have been mistaken in the numbers. On the second passing he stopped the car and got out to inspect the wreckage. As he looked closely at the place he saw the brass number on the battered wreck of a door, and he observed that the place was damaged beyond the possibility of occupancy by any one. Moreover it was easy to see that the wreck was not of recent origin—that the explosive had fallen long before the German cipher address had been written.

As he stood gloomily surveying the end of the blind trail, Elton's mind calculated the possibilities that now lay before him. Had the Germans purposely written this address as a ruse? He shook his head as he asked himself the question. It was illogical that they would go to the pains of enciphering an address and sending it across the lines through their own courier system unless it were something more than a hoax. Although No. 20 Rue Carnot was definitely out of his plans, Rue Carnot was not, he concluded finally. Not until he had tested every possibility that might grow out of the number, such as adding ten, adding a hundred, adding fifty—a favorite German trick in both code and cipher numbers.

Climbing back into the taxi, he proceeded on through Rue Carnot, carefully scrutinizing the numbers as they mounted upward. No. 30 turned out to be a small, squat stone structure of one story, over the front of which hung a sign proclaiming that bicycles were repaired there. There was nothing about any of the other houses, as they drove on, that distinguished one from the other until they reached No. 200, which loomed massive above its neighbors at a street intersection. There was, on the door of this place, a sign in faded gilt letters which Elton was unable to read in passing. Continuing on for a distance of several squares, he left the auto and sent Walters and Sands back to the hotel at Montrouge to wait for him.

No. 200 Rue Carnot stood to a height of three stories above the sidewalk. It was built of heavy stone blocks and was easily the aristocrat of the neighborhood, although severely plain, in a style of half a century before. On each floor, at front and side, there were groups of three windows, narrow and set deep into the stone. Elton noted, as he approached, that the blinds were half drawn on the windows of the ground and second floors, while the windows of the top story were securely sealed by heavy gray shutters. A thin coil of blue smoke rising from one of five tall brick chimneys at the roof told that the house was occupied, although there were no other immediate signs of habitation.

But No. 200 took on a sudden vital importance in Elton's mind as he passed by the front entrance and made out the small gilt letters of the sign hung on the oaken door.

M. DOMREMY

Conservatoire de Musique

Maintaining his air of nonchalance, Elton sauntered on to the end of Rue Carnot, emerged into the Avenue Philippe-Auguste and hailed a passing taxi. He drove to Place de la Concorde, got out and secured a second cab in which he drove to American headquarters in Paris. There he made use of his authority as a headquarters staff officer to secure an order of billet for two, after which he hurried in another taxi to Montrouge.

"Get your things together," he announced to Sergeant Walters. "We're going home and have no further use for our rooms here."

"Home?" echoed Walters with a grimace of distress. "You're meaning, sir, we've lost out and go back to headquarters empty handed?"

"Nothing was farther from my mind than that," Elton smiled. "I meant we're moving into our new home in Paris—No. 194 Rue Carnot."

Sergeant Walters' face wreathed into smiles.

"I don't know what it's all about," he chuckled. "But it listens to me like we was moving up into the fighting zone."

TWO HOURS later Elton and Walters were comfortably established in the best guest room at the home of an elderly French couple at No. 194 Rue Carnot. Their American uniforms, even as welfare workers, together with the official order of billet, gave them entrée to the warmest hospitality of the home. A quart of Burgundy from monsieur's musty cellar quickened the cordial relations and opened up easy gossipy conversation which Elton was quickly able to shape to his own ends.

The school of music at the corner, four doors beyond? Monsieur and madame waxed immediately voluble. It was not to their liking. There was such a thing as music, music—too much music. Day and night, sometimes! And then it took something from the dignity of this fine old street—in which monsieur and madame had lived since their marriage, a matter of forty years. As to Monsieur Domremy—well, he was a great artist at the piano, and at the cello. It was Franz Liszt, always, before the war—Liszt rhapsodies; but since the war Georges Bizet or Chopin or Chaminade, or just noisy jazz.

Patronage? Yes, Monsieur Domremy fared well. It was eight years now since he first appeared from no place in particular and acquired the house and opened his private studio—first for the piano, then, since the war, for all sorts of instruments. Cellos, flutes, tubas, clarinets, even kettledrums and cymbals. And almost daily M. Domremy had his orchestra together for rehearsal, and at times the noise would be terrific. Music,

music— Madame shrugged her shoulders and trusted that her American guests would not be cheated of their sleep. If so, perhaps they could secure from the gendarmes an order of restraint, at least after midnight of the noisiest nights.

As to M. Domremy's personal affairs, they knew but little. An Alsatian, they had heard. But he had a niece, Mlle. Dupre, who was a Parisienne and in whose musical education he must spend much time since she visited him almost daily. And a woman of influence she must be, too, since she came always by motor; at times by taxi but on occasion in a large private car—and only people of great influence could have gasoline for their own automobiles since the war.

"I count myself fortunate in being so near a school for music," said Elton finally. "I have always longed for instruction in Paris at the piano. Do you think M. Domremy would accept an American as his pupil?"

"But yes, I am certain of it," exclaimed madame. "His pupils, since the war, seem mostly men of other countries. By their skins I would say his orchestra is mostly Spanish, with perhaps one or two Swiss and Portuguese. We are enchanted, messieurs, that the music will not annoy you."

"On the contrary," said Elton, "I hope to profit very much by the opportunity to be here."

He arose by way of ending the conversation, reached for his cap and nodded for Walters to accompany him.

"If you will pardon us, my good friends," he excused himself, "we have an engagement for the theater tonight."

Out in the street Elton walked slowly westward toward the Avenue Philippe-Auguste, his eyes upon the cobbled sidewalk. Walters refrained from breaking in upon his reverie, although consumed with curiosity as to what was afoot now.

"We have upon our hands during the next few days one of the hardest jobs either of us has ever tackled," Elton announced grimly as they came to the Avenue and hailed a passing cab.

"And which is, sir—" queried Walters eagerly.

"Doing nothing—absolutely nothing."

"You mean we ain't on a hot trail, after all, Cap'n?"

"If we're on any kind of a trail, I'd say it is a red hot one," Elton responded. "But before we can take any chances finding out, we've got to sort of establish ourselves in this neighborhood and let folks get used to the sight of us so as to make our next move a logical one."

"How long will that take of standing by, sir?"

"Two or three days—perhaps a week. I'll have to depend upon intuition to know when to strike."

Walters face gathered in gloom.

"Sir, Paris's a tough place to lay around out of sight doing nothing in. Ain't there something we can do, sort of, to lay the ground or pick up stray ends?"

"Well," smiled Elton, "I think there's one thing we can do that will prove very useful later on."

"And what is that, sir?" Walters asked eagerly.

"Catch up on a little of our lost sleep. That's how I'm going to spend the next two days, since there's nothing better to do. Perhaps, after that, I'll not be quite so dumb as I've been at times the past few days."

CHAPTER IV

THE MUSIC MASTER

MONSIEUR DOMREMY was a very reserved man, nearing sixty, his features masked by a thick black beard of an earlier era, his thoughts screened by steely gray eyes that looked out in never changing expression from under thick overhanging brows. His voice was low and reserved as of a man who weighs carefully what he says before he speaks, even when he exchanged nothing more than amenities. There was nothing about the man that stamped him as of any distinct nationality.

His accommodating billet host introduced Elton to the music master of Rue

Carnot, four days after the date of Elton's arrival, as a resident of the neighborhood; and as his French sponsor explained the purpose of their visit, Elton seized upon the brief opportunity to observe and estimate M. Domremy. One certainty alone presented itself out of his survey of stolid personality before him. Monsieur was not of the music master type; and if he were giving his life to music, it was not with the aid of a temperament adapted to music, Elton thought.

"I have told *monsieur l'Américain* of your genius with the piano," said the Frenchman to M. Domremy. "It is his great desire that he improve his ability with the piano under your guidance, monsieur."

M. Domremy looked Elton over with level, unyielding eyes and shook his head.

"I regret that my time is so occupied with my pupils," he decided, enunciating his words as clearly and deliberately as a jurist passing upon some weighty point of law.

"It would be a great accommodation to me, monsieur," Elton put in. "I have looked forward to an opportunity to improve my poor technique, and when I was billeted on your fine old street it seemed to me that my dream was about to come true when I heard of you and your school."

Again M. Domremy shook his head solemnly.

"I regret," he said shortly.

"Perhaps you could suggest to me some one to whom I might apply," Elton persisted, unwilling to be turned away. "I will have my evenings largely to myself."

"I know of no one," said M. Domremy, with a shake of his massive head. He added with a slight bow, "You will pardon me, messieurs?"

A polite dismissal. Elton swallowed a feeling of bitter disappointment. But he accepted the inevitable. Further insistence would be quite useless in view of Domremy's uncompromising attitude. Some other way, then, would have to be devised of exploring the suspected rendezvous—some way, perhaps, to be suggested by the French Second Section.

M. Domremy was bowing them to the door when it flung open, almost in their faces. There entered a young woman whom Elton would have identified as Mlle. Dupre, monsieur's musical niece, even if his escort had not murmured her name as he bowed low in greeting.

"*Monsieur l'Américain!*" mademoiselle exclaimed, as Elton paused momentarily and met her eyes.

"Elton, of the Army welfare service, mademoiselle." He seized the opportunity to present himself, addressing her in French.

Mademoiselle extended her hand.

"I am charmed to make your acquaintance," she said in excellent English, albeit a distinct upper class London accent. "I am Mademoiselle Dupre, niece of Monsieur Domremy, and his devoted pupil at the piano—although I fear rather a hopeless one."

"I had hoped to receive the benefit of monsieur's instruction, of which I have heard such fine things," said Elton.

"From our good neighbors," she hastened to say, adding ingenuously, "You are one of the two American gentlemen who have been billeted near us."

"I am honored, mademoiselle, that you had noted the fact of our humble existence."

"And so we are to have you as a pupil then, monsieur?"

Elton shook his head regretfully.

"I am sorry that Monsieur Domremy is unable to give me the time for instruction. It would be so convenient, and I'm sure the instruction would be most profitable. But perhaps I can find some one—"

"My dear uncle!" Mademoiselle turned to M. Domremy in reproach. "Why have you been so unkind? One more will not matter."

The music master's deliberation was less pronounced in dealing with Mlle. Dupre.

"If it pleases you, mademoiselle," he assented with a grave bow.

"And to think," mademoiselle exulted, turning gaily to Elton, "in another minute you would have been gone. And uncle says so little he would not have told me he had turned you away."

"I am very grateful to you, mademoiselle," said Elton, bowing in his best French manner.

AT THE first moment of meeting her, Elton had taken Mlle. Dupre as an ordinary vivacious French woman, impulsive, gay and with perhaps never a thought aside from her flirtations and her diversions. She was somewhat above average height, slender and simply dressed, but with an exquisite taste that must have consulted the most expensive shops of the Rue de la Paix.

Mademoiselle was exceedingly attractive of feature. Her hair was jet black and her brows fine high arches under which large blue eyes looked out from under slightly drooping lids. Her nose was rather thin and high bridged, and a trifle long, but not with such emphasis as to destroy the beauty of her face. Her mouth was a finely chiseled bow which parted easily over perfect teeth; and it was not until he had looked at her for some moments that Elton observed a certain elusive harshness, the veriest hint of a sneer at its corners.

There was about her, too, a poise, a certain easy *savoir faire* that was beyond her years. Twenty-four, Elton estimated her age. Her voice, as she interceded in his behalf, was clear and vivacious.

"You will care to come often—say the several times of each week?" she inquired of the American.

"I do not wish to be a burden," he replied. "Monsieur Domremy has made it very plain that he is sorely overworked. My evenings are free, and I shall be glad of the opportunity to come as often as possible."

"That is a detail which uncle can arrange with you," she said. "Perhaps when he has heard you play, his enthusiasm may run away with him. Dear uncle is forever discovering a new prodigy, and I'm sure, when he gets used to the idea, an American pupil will be a welcome change over these Spaniards and Swiss upon whom he has had to depend since the war."

There was a note of raillery in her voice as she said this. Mademoiselle translated her words into French for the benefit of M. Domremy, who merely bowed solemnly again.

"You may come tomorrow, say at seven, for your first exercise," mademoiselle told Elton. She held out her hand at the height of her chin, palm downward in polite dismissal, and added, "*Adieu, monsieur*."

As he left the house, Elton saw in the street a limousine of expensive English manufacture. Its shining black paint told that it was one of that few to escape war service because of the station of its owner. On its door appeared in gilt a small coronet and coat of arms which he identified as French. The chauffeur was in livery—a black uniform of broadcloth set off in scarlet facings. The limousine purred, a fact that indicated that mademoiselle's visit was to be brief, since not even the most extravagant would waste precious gasoline in wartime idling an automobile for more than a few moments.

Elton heard only vaguely the voluble felicitations of his host as they walked the few intervening steps to the billet. His mind was busy with the enigma of mademoiselle's extraordinary personality. Was there something more than a lively Parisienne's interest in a presentable male of the species behind her interest in him? Something more than the sympathy of a loyal French woman for one of her country's allies from across the seas?

He found Sergeant Walters pacing the floor of their billet with a worried red face, a cloud of tobacco smoke trailing fretfully from a large French briar pipe.

"Sure, sir," Walters said at sight of his chief, "and ain't there something doing this time?"

"Why, what is it that's upset you, Walters?" Elton inquired. "You were asleep when I left you an hour ago."

"Sleep! I'm fed up on sleep for once," protested Walters. He poured out his troubles at a lively rate as if to relieve himself from choking on them. "Five days I been in this room, sir, except for a couple of short walks every day—doing nothing but show ourselves. It's too deep for me, Cap'n, shut up in this cell, and a war going on, Boche spies running loose. Can't you let me in on what's the game?"

"He also serves who only stands and waits," Elton quoted with a smile. "I've already made a substantial first move; it may come to much or it may come to nothing. We may wake up in a few days to find it's the wrong trail, or no trail at all; that all I've accomplished is sleep, and a slight addition to my musical education. If it's a live trail, well, we both may have our hands full enough to suit even you, Walters. I may know a lot by tomorrow night."

"But ain't there something I can be doing, Cap'n—somebody that needs trailing, or something?"

"I'd give a great deal to have a bit of trailing done right now," Elton replied thoughtfully. "But it might be very indiscreet—rather too expected. No, we'll have to use patience for awhile and leave you behind, although you'll not envy me when I tell you that all I'm going to do next is take a few music lessons."

"It wouldn't be so terrible laying around," Walters persisted, "if we was to move on the other side of the street where I could watch their joint out the window. That'd give me something to do—and wouldn't it help some?"

"It certainly would," Elton assented. "I'd give anything to watch the comings and goings at No. 200. But I chose this billet deliberately. It's rather a bold move we made in coming here, and a billet across the street would be too obvious. Can't you see my point, Walters? A bit fine, but please remember that if we're on a hot trail, we deal with no ordinary agents of the type of Streib and his kind. They've got to be equipped with pretty fast head pieces to get by in Paris. And remember the old saying—the best spies are never caught!"

WHEN Elton reported for his first tryout at the piano as a prospective pupil of M. Domremy, it was to find the music master of No. 200 Rue Carnot alone in the house. Elton noted that a small grand piano had been installed in the living room. He had surmised, on his first visit, that monsieur's studio must be on one of the upper floors since there had been no instrument in sight at the time. Apparently the piano had been brought in from outside, or carted down the broad stairway from an upper floor.

M. Domremy himself answered the door and ushered Elton in with dignified reserve. But a moment later a noisy Parisian taxicab chugged up to the house and Mlle. Dupre joined them.

"I could not resist," she exclaimed, when the formalities of French greeting had been disposed of. "Not alone do I wish to hear you at the piano but I thought it wise to observe how well you get along with my dear uncle in your first lesson. You know, he is so staid and so stiff with strangers at first."

"You are very gracious, mademoiselle," Elton replied. "But I fear you will be disappointed in my poor efforts at the piano. You see, my fingers are very stiff from disuse at the keys."

"I know your playing will charm me," she said gaily. "Come, uncle is ready for you. He must hear you play, of course, so that he can know just where to begin with your lessons. You have brought your music with you?"

"No, mademoiselle," Elton confessed. "What little I play is by ear—things I learned as a boy. The piano is more of an aspiration with me than an accomplishment."

As he sat at the little French piano, Elton remembered with gratitude the coaching of his boyhood days that had brought many an hour of bitterness and resentment—because he must run the keys while his more fortunate playmates continued their lively game out in the open. But now even such meager ability as he had acquired was to stand him in good stead.

He ran his hands lightly along the keys, paused to work the stiffness out of his fingers and then struck up the notes of a waltz—one that he had memorized years before, Strauss' "Blue Danube."

"Monsieur! If you please—not!"

Mlle. Dupre's interruption was sharp, expressive of sudden horror. He looked up to see a warning hand raised before him.

"Do you not know what you play, monsieur?" she demanded. "That is the music of the—the Boche!"

"But it is the only thing I ever learned to play very well," said Elton, "and it has always seemed to me very beautiful."

"In Paris," Mlle. Dupre admonished him, "we do not play the music of the Hun. Franz Liszt, Wagner, Strauss—no matter how beautiful you may think them—they are *défendu*."

"I'm sorry," Elton replied. "Aside from a few simple American compositions I play only a few of the pieces you forbid."

"Then play us something from America." Mademoiselle was smiling again now. "At least that will not be—treason."

When he had played several simple pieces, Mlle. Dupre applauded his effort. Even M. Domremy smiled very slightly, the first indication Elton had seen that he was capable of such an expression. A certain tenseness, almost hostility, also passed from the music master's face. He addressed mademoiselle briefly.

"Uncle says he is ready for you to begin," she elaborated upon his remarks. "He suggests that for the time being you must work upon your fingers—finger exercises and massage for the muscles."

M. Domremy took his place beside Elton at the piano. For an hour the lesson continued, four-finger exercises, ending with a few simple arpeggios. Now that the piano had furnished him with his passports to the place, Elton felt something of his ancient impatience at the endless running of scales. Mademoiselle had disappeared upstairs and did not reappear.

Four other visitors entered during the practise. Elton got only the briefest glimpse of them as M. Domremy ignored their arrival. They arrived separately and Elton took them for Latins, perhaps Spaniards, though one suggested Brazil. He noted that they regarded him with more than passing interest, although without speaking; and each, in turn, went immediately up the stairway to another floor.

Elton was leaving, a colorless departure, M. Domremy merely bowing him to the door, when a fifth man entered. He carried a violin case under his arm and Elton noted that he looked the part of a musician. His face was long and oval, with sensitive, well moulded features and large, very black eyes which regarded Elton with a sort of blasé detachment. Elton saw that one of the man's legs was gone and he walked with the aid of an ordinary wooden peg strapped to his thigh.

"Mademoiselle has arrived?" he inquired in French of M. Domremy.

At monsieur's nod of affirmation, the man with the violin stumped across the room and mounted the stairs without evincing further interest in Elton.

"The day after tomorrow at eight of the evening," said M. Domremy, as Elton stood in the open door.

"But my duties will interfere. Can not you give me tomorrow evening instead?" Elton asked with such insistence as he thought discreet.

"As you please, monsieur," the music master acquiesced readily.

OUTSIDE Elton felt the beating of rain in his face, a heavy shower that had sprung up suddenly out of the June sky. Another figure impressed itself upon his mind now—a blind beggar who sat at the corner. Although there could be small hope of gratuities on the deserted Rue Carnot during a rainstorm, the blind man sat in his rigid posture of eternal patience, unmindful of the increasing downpour.

At his billet Elton sat for several hours reflecting upon his visit, analyzing, piecing together, reviving every incident, circumstance and gesture. The result of his thoughts was a disquieting uncertainty. Mademoiselle's protest at the German waltz had been genuine. Either that or she was a consummate artist at portraying an emotion which she did not feel. And there was no question of M. Domremy's rôle as a teacher of the piano. He had been in deadly earnest in prompting Elton in the rudiments of finger technique.

Against all this negative evidence was a mere intuition, a certain tension he had sensed in the very atmosphere at No. 200 Rue Carnot. Was he to depend upon that? Or might not his own highly strung nerves have produced that feeling out of his attitude of suspicion toward the house and its occupants? Might not he himself be a victim in this instance of the virus of suspicion that was prevalent behind the lines—that caused imaginative people to suspect even their intimate neighbors, their own kin?

At eleven o'clock he retired and turned his mind to thoughts of sleep. From the borderland of slumber his mind was recalled by the strains of music. As he listened, he sat up, then arose and stood at the open window. An odd medley of common airs in which the heavy bass notes and the intermittent rumble of a kettle drum prevailed. He identified the instruments one by one—a violin, a cornet, a cello and a bass viol. Perhaps an oboe, and the drum. And an elusive sound, discordant and vague, which he was unable to fathom. The music came from the upper floor of M. Domremy's house.

An uneasy intuition stirred Elton as he listened to the *pot pourri* of heavy, discordant music. Then he laughed at his own highly strung nerves and went finally to sleep.

On the following evening at eight o'clock, when he went for his second lesson with M. Domremy, it was with the feeling that he must find some tangible evidence to justify further suspicion, or lay the case before the French and seek their assistance. Certainly a case of such importance could not trail along forever, nor could he force himself upon the music master except at the brief and intermittent periods set aside for his regular visits. Before going, he had put Walters' impatience to rest by sending him on a makeshift assignment to Bois de Boulogne, chasing an improvised will-o'-the-wisp.

M. Domremy received him as before and led him immediately to the piano to repeat a tendon developing set of colorless arpeggios. But they were barely started before a stumping sound on the stairway proclaimed the one legged violinist. Elton glanced up covertly to see the five men of the day before descending in one group. He arose from the piano and addressed M. Domremy boldly.

"I have not met the other pupils of your school," he said in French. "Will you present me?"

The music master got up and stood in silence, staring at the five men in indecision as they entered the room from the stairway. They in turn stared dumbly back at M. Domremy. The several seconds of tension were broken by Mlle. Dupre who hurried into the room from the stairs.

"Uncle, have you forgotten your manners?" she prompted the music master with mock severity. "Come, let us present our American friend of whose talents and presence we are so very proud. But first—"

Mademoiselle greeted Elton in high spirits, took from her bodice a red carnation and thrust its stem through the upper buttonhole of his uniform.

"The symbol of our gratitude to your country and our affection for its brave citizen," she exclaimed. "Now, my comrades in music, I have the great honor to present our new friend and associate, Monsieur Elton, who is attached to the gallant *Armée Américaine.*"

The five men stepped up by file, like so many soldiers receiving rations, and took Elton's hand with a deep bow. Each, as he was presented, stood before Elton for only a moment with a muttered, "*Je suis enchante*," then passed behind him. Only by an intense concentration was he able to classify their faces, for his own purpose, as they passed. And he was conscious when the last of them had dropped his hand that the incident only deepened his uncertainty. There was nothing of the spy type about these men. Youngsters, all of them, well under thirty and with no evidence of strain or embarrassment as they met his eye. Rather, he thought he caught, in each pair of eyes, a touch of amusement; certainly no hint of suspicion or hostility.

The peg legged violinist alone remained in the room, the others passing out of the house at once. He stood looking for several moments at M. Domremy in an attitude of uncertainty.

"I am to play tonight, as usual, monsieur?" he inquired presently.

Mlle. Dupre replied while the ponderous M. Domremy was fumbling impotently for his tongue.

"But certainly, Ferdinand," she said; adding with a sly smile, "You must learn not to neglect your music, Ferdinand, because of some giddy thing that has caught your eyes, you wicked boy."

Ferdinand's somber black eyes twinkled. He bowed his obedience and left the house.

CHAPTER V

BELLING THE CAT

IT WAS with a feeling of impending defeat that Elton left at the conclusion of his piano lesson. His second visit had netted him nothing tangible. In fact, it had only added weight to a conclusion that he was following an empty trail. And except for the promptings of intuition, he might have concluded that he but wasted time prying further into the house at No. 200 Rue Carnot. Elton had faith in the silent voice from within that argued against dropping the trail. It was not superstition, that belief in intangibles. Rather it was a faith in the powers of the subconscious mind—of a person delicately attuned to receive subtle impressions.

At times in his past career as an operative, this silent voice had saved him from defeat—had overridden tangible evidence that led him away from his quarry. And at times it had taken him away on a false scent, only to find that he had permitted tired nerves to play pranks with his imagination.

On an impulse he hailed a taxicab as he came into the Avenue Philippe-Auguste. At least, if No. 200 Rue Carnot was the most baffling spy nest in Paris, the French secret police would have some wind of it. Or perhaps, if they shared his suspicions, they might accept responsibility for the one plan that now offered itself for a prompt solution of the enigma—a search by force for concrete evidence. In any event he remembered the final definite orders of Colonel Rand—to take the French into his confidence if the case proved doubtful.

After changing taxicabs several times in order to efface his trail from possible shadows, Elton lost himself afoot among the night throngs on the Rue de Rivoli and slipped cautiously into the quarters of the French Second Section. The chief of the section was absent—on a case of the greatest importance, the young lieutenant in charge explained. The lieutenant assured Elton that any matter, no matter of what importance or delicacy, might be intrusted to him instead.

"You see," said the lieutenant, an immaculate officer with the graven features and cynical *savoir faire* of the French secret service, "you see in me what you Americans term the *alter ego* of *monsieur le commandant*. What you say to me—it is the same as you say it to my superior. Something, I take it, has gone wrong with the American welfare service. In what way may I serve you, monsieur? I am the Lieutenant d'Auteuil."

"I am Captain Elton, American Second Section, counter-espionage," Elton introduced himself. He presented his travel orders in verification of his claim.

The Frenchman examined them carefully, looked at Elton searchingly a moment, then accepted him. D'Auteuil smiled apologetically as he extended his hand.

"I beg your pardon, my Captain," he exclaimed. "Your disguise misled me. I see it must be a matter of some importance. Will you not come with me into the office of *monsieur le commandant* where we may speak undisturbed?"

Elton briefly sketched his mission. Discovery of the cipher messages in a German spy nest in the environs of Belfort—breaking of the message into English with its astounding order to the German secret agents in Paris. Finally, the empty trail at No. 20 Rue Carnot, and the rendezvous of the music master at No. 200 of the same street.

As the young American spoke, d'Auteuil's eyes never left his face.

"Ah, my Captain," exclaimed the Frenchman, "so you have made the acquaintance of Mademoiselle Dupre, charming niece of Monsieur Domremy, the master of music?"

Elton started at sound of the names. Something in the other's voice filled him with a sudden disquieting suspicion that his zeal had tricked him into a monumental blunder.

"Then you—you know them, monsieur?" he prompted the officer anxiously. "And I have been in error in suspecting them?"

"I know them very well," replied d'Auteuil. He shrugged his shoulders and arched his brows as he added, "But my knowledge is purely professional, my Captain. As to your second query—is it not wise to suspect any one to whom suspicion points?"

"Thank you." Elton breathed his relief. "I feared for a moment I might have blundered. My suspicions are little more than intuition, added to the arbitrary fact that if you add a naught to the address on the cipher message, you have No. 200. Beyond that I have been able to make little progress to date; but I thought, before going further, it was proper to bring the case to French official attention."

* * *

LIEUTENANT D'AUTEUIL lighted a cigaret very deliberately and blew a reflective cloud of smoke.

"Intuition is excellent, my Captain," he said. "Mine serves me in good stead. It has enabled me to trap more than one clever rascal. It even led me to spend weeks baiting my best traps for Mademoiselle Dupre. But you are aware, my Captain, that intuition is not evidence, and it does not provide the facts upon which a court will send one to the guillotine."

"Since intuition leads us both in the same direction, there must be a way of developing the facts," said Elton. "It was for that I came here."

"Just what would you suggest, my Captain?" d'Auteuil asked laconically.

"If no better way offers, I thought the place might be seized and searched for evidence. Or, perhaps, you might be justified in holding them all as suspects to put a stop to possible mischief while we investigate."

"*Mon dieu, Monsieur le Capitaine!*" cried Lieutenant d'Auteuil. "You suggest the impossible. Already do my fingers burn from the feel of fire in the dark. A second time must I know what I am about!"

"I don't believe I follow your meaning, Lieutenant."

"Pardon, I will explain. You have heard it said that the best spies are never caught?"

"I have heard, but never quite accepted that theory, monsieur."

"If mademoiselle is a spy, my Captain, she is of that class. Whether she is or is not—that is a question that has driven me to the border of madness, for it was I who was detailed to solve her case. The greatest difficulty, my Captain, is this: in addition to her cleverness, Mademoiselle Dupre is entrenched securely in such powerful influence—well, without the most complete material evidence against her we can not move. A fact of which we have good cause to know."

There flashed into Elton's mind the

limousine that had awaited her that first afternoon they met at M. Domremy's—the car with the crested coat of arms.

"You mean she is of a prominent French family—one that should be above suspicion?" Elton asked.

"*Vive Dieu!*" exclaimed d'Auteuil. "But she is a nobody, a nothing, an Alsatian, perhaps, a Parisian by adoption—a brief eight years she has been here. But perhaps you have observed, my Captain, her amazing vivacity, the beauty of her great languorous eyes, the fire of her personality, the lightning of her mind. A beauty, even in Paris, would you not say so, *Monsieur le Capitaine?*"

"A very attractive woman, to be sure—of her kind," Elton affirmed.

"Then, if our eyes, the eyes of youth, can see her charm, consider, my Captain, in what ravishing beauty she must appear before the eyes of a roué of three-score years. Will you accept my confidence, my Captain, if I speak with the greatest frankness?"

"You may speak with freedom, monsieur."

"Mademoiselle Dupre, my Captain, is the *petite amie* of Le Comte de Grenelle, whose power is a thing to be reckoned with in the *Chambre des Députés*, and in the affairs of the *ministère de la marine*."

"Am I to understand," Elton cut in sharply, "that such a condition as that can be permitted to interfere—when your country itself fights for its life?"

"Ah, no, *Monsieur le Capitaine*. You misunderstand. Mademoiselle depends upon her wit far more than upon the Comte de Grenelle—if she is, as I shall forever suspect, in the service of Prussia. It is merely for the comte to interfere if we act upon what you call the intuition, the suspicion, upon which we are to produce no facts. And if, as I have suggested, there are facts—" d'Auteuil shrugged his helplessness—"we can only say that the best spies are never trapped."

Elton thought for some moments in silence.

"Have you tried following Monsieur Domremy, or his supposed pupils?" he asked.

"But yes, my Captain. There is no resource that we have not exhausted, even to shadowing the residence of Monsieur Domremy, seizing a certain violinist who goes about with a leg of wood; even placing mademoiselle herself on the grill for two terrible days of question. It was for that I felt the ire of the Comte de Grenelle, my Captain."

"The comte himself objected to your search for the facts because the woman was his mistress?"

"Without question; and he spoke into high ears, since there came to us from above a sharp demand to know if the whole Second Section was bereft of its reason, was gone stark spy mad like a lot of excited civilians, if any one was longer safe now that we grilled innocent Frenchwomen of known repute against whom we had no vestige of evidence!"

"And your superiors called you off the trail for no better reason, monsieur?"

"Ah, a warning. A rap on the knuckles as you Americans say when your general scolds because of hot water into which your actions have gotten him. Our commandant merely pounded the table and swore that we must be more careful, we must have the evidence, we must know what we were going about. But no, my Captain, I did not drop the scent. I merely became more circumspect and devoted myself to the track of the violinist of the wooden peg since my suspicions clung to him as the needle of your compass points to the magnetic north. But when I closed with him I found—nothing."

LIEUTENANT D'AUTEUIL tendered his silver cigaret case to Elton and lighted another himself.

"My suspicion was not put at rest even then, my Captain. But a more pressing matter intervened. For weeks it has taken our time. Again I must speak in confidence. It is certain that the Boche has established somewhere in Paris, or environs, a powerful station for the transmission of his secret code reports by radio. We have picked up its buzzings—two, three times of every week we hear it, distinctly at times. It must send to some secret receiving station out of Paris whence the messages are relayed by runner. Or the Boche may have given it power enough to carry into their own lines beyond the Marne, which is no great distance. Until that is located, our best operatives must bend every energy."

"You say, monsieur," said Elton thoughtfully, "that you found nothing that would be of any help to me."

"Nothing, my Captain, that has substance," replied d'Auteuil. "For two weeks I was the shadow of that peg leg. Five times in that period I followed him to the Gare de Lyon. Always he carry his violin, always he met some one at the station—some one who travels south. So, when I shadow him one day from the *maison* of Monsieur Domremy, I have my men pounce upon him as he enters the station. And he has upon him—nothing. *Voilà!*"

"You gave him a very thorough search, monsieur?"

"*Certainement!*" There was a slight annoyance in d'Auteuil's voice at Elton's question. "We even cut in half his wooden leg and it is not hollow as we suspect, so that we have to buy for him another. We dissect his cigarets. Nothing else do he carry, except his violin and his music, and this—"

"He carried music, you say?"

Elton half rose from his chair as he cut d'Auteuil off.

"Yes, *Monsieur le Capitaine*," said the French officer, his placid face ruffled by shocked surprise at the blunt interruption.

"And it gave you no clew?" Elton asked bruskly.

Lieutenant d'Auteuil's shoulders rose in an exaggerated shrug of negation.

"We searched every sheet, the margins, the covers—even dipped it into the chemicals that develop the best invisible ink of the Prussians. But there was nothing—merely the music."

"Thank you, Monsieur, for your time," said Elton. He arose, took up his hat and extended his hand in farewell. "You have given me much valuable information."

"May I ask of *Monsieur le Capitaine* a very personal question?" the Frenchman inquired very formally. "One at which I trust there will be considered no offense?"

"Why, certainly, monsieur, by all means," said Elton with a smile.

"The lovely flower you wear in your buttonhole—may I make bold to ask where and just how you acquired it, my Captain?"

"Certainly, monsieur," said Elton. "I am free to tell you that it was placed there by no less a person than your charming Mademoiselle Dupre."

"As I suspected some moments ago," smiled d'Auteuil. "Has *Monsieur le Capitaine* examined the peculiar cuttings of the petals—a barely noticeable thing unless one were looking for them?"

In a sudden chill of apprehension at d'Auteuil's word, Elton took the red carnation from his coat and saw the very slight mutilation of the petals. Six light cuttings on the outer rim of the petals, three slightly longer cuts immediately under them while a succession of twelve petals were cut squarely in half. Their purpose struck him with the force of a blow.

"If I but had here the latest German cipher key, perhaps I could tell you what message it is mademoiselle has seen fit to have you carry about," said d'Auteuil. "It is certain to be a very simple cipher, but I do not—"

"I think perhaps I can supply that myself," Elton rejoined, "if I may have a sheet of paper."

He wrote down hurriedly the broken German cipher key, the double headed alphabet arrangement that had unmasked the house on Rue Carnot. Then, after several moments of study, he handed it to the Frenchman.

"You may read for yourself, monsieur—the sixth, third and twelfth letter of the upper key line, following the order of mademoiselle's petal cuts. Very simple, but, I must add, somewhat embarrassing to me."

"Spy," read d'Auteuil, politely supressing a smile. "Mademoiselle has chosen her own way of advertising your presence to her Prussian associates in Paris. Very, very conclusive. And yet, worthless as evidence before a hard headed court, as you must see, my Captain. Le Comte de Grenelle would only laugh us out of Paris as fanciful madmen."

AS TEN o'clock of the next night ticked painfully by, Elton took up a restless pacing of American Military Police headquarters on the Rue Ste. Anne. Every few minutes he paused to consult his wrist watch in a growing anxiety.

Sergeant Walters should have reported half an hour ago, at least if he had been immediately successful in his mission. Pictures of possible disaster began to torment him. Had the Prussian shadows tripped Walters? Or had they eluded him in his quest? Or even lured him into a deft Prussian trap from which there would be no escape?

A simple enough mission he had given Walters if nothing went wrong, yet one which the slightest bungling or misfortune might bring to disaster. Walters had leaped at the opportunity, had spent the day with Private Sands planning their every move. Walters was to lie in wait for the one legged violinist when he emerged from No. 200 Rue Carnot, shadow him by taxi, and either lure him into Sands' cab or take him by force at the Gare de Lyon.

Then Walters' face loomed suddenly, framed in the open doorway of the assistant provost marshal's office, where Elton waited, as if an apparition appearing in response to a prayer. There was a certain vague glint in the gray-green eyes of the veteran non-com that was eloquent of success to one who could read the signs in Walters' unemotional face.

"You may march him in, Walters," exulted Elton. "I'm ready for him."

"Sure, sir, and it can't be done," said Walters. "I've sent a couple of lads to help carry him up."

"You mean he's out—injured?" Elton asked anxiously. "Is he in condition to talk?"

"Only injured in his feelings, sir. A slippery bird, and since we hadn't no cuffs along, I took possession of his surplus leg to make sure he wouldn't leave us in the lurch."

"Get anything out of him, or find anything incriminating?"

"A cool lad, sir. Never batted an eye when we got him in Sands' taxi and I poked a gun in his midriff. All we could get out of him was to have our fun, his turn would come."

Private Sands and two strapping M.P. privates entered with the one legged violinist, two of them carrying the prisoner, the third bringing up the rear with the fellow's violin case and wooden peg. They placed him in a chair in front of a desk upon the top of which Elton had seated himself, and at a sign from the captain they left the room, closing the door behind them.

Ferdinand, the name by which Mlle. Dupre addressed him, was wholly unperturbed. He sat looking at Elton nonchalantly, as if he felt himself master of the situation. At a nod from the captain, Sergeant Walters searched him from head to foot, finding nothing except a small pocket knife and a comb. From the violin case Elton brought forth several sheets of music, inspected the notes minutely and turned to the prisoner.

"You know, of course, why we have arrested you?" He addressed the fellow in French.

"Probably as a spy," replied the other coolly, speaking with cultivated enunciation. "That appears to be the chief mania in Paris these days."

"You deny the charge, then, monsieur?"

"It is too ridiculous to need denial," sneered Ferdinand. "I shall demand full satisfaction for this outrage, my friend, and you will find that arresting a Spanish National is no small matter with my government—nor with the French government, which once embarrassed itself by the folly of its own agents."

"But suppose I have evidence? What then?"

"Monsieur insults my intelligence by such chatter," retorted Ferdinand. "It is because of this spy insanity that I do not carry about with me so much as my own private letters from Madrid."

"But you carry about with you—your music, monsieur?"

Elton shot this at the prisoner suddenly, a cutting implication in his words. But the prisoner did not wince or react with the slightest change of expression.

"I am a composer of music, monsieur," he said evenly.

Elton turned to Walters. He saw that there was no hope of shaking the prisoner's easy *sang-froid* by further questioning. Doubtless Ferdinand thought himself safely entrenched behind the influence of Mlle. Dupre, that and the total lack of evidence against him. Behind his callous indifference must lie the belief that his dilemma would end in an abject apology from his captors, perhaps in their reprimand by high authority.

"Keep an eye on Ferdinand, Walters," said Elton lightly. "I'm going into another room for a time to see if I can whistle the merry tune our young composer has written for us."

HIS FIRST glance at the music sheets from Ferdinand's violin case had disclosed to Elton that it was identical with the music cipher he had broken at headquarters. He quickly set down the key and laboriously deciphered the symbols, letter by letter. But, certain as he had been of a spy message, he was unprepared for the document that lay disclosed to him when he had written the final word.

Hq. 70 Koenigergratzerstrasse, Berlin. By Courier. Supplemental submarine targets: Str. *Floquet* sailed Spain for Brest on 24th. Str. *Perine* due Marseille 26th with French colonial troops. Str. *Acacias* left Le Havre 24th for Boston, northern course. Important: Agent 16 expects list sailings American transports from New York this week. Verified through M. Marine. Will transmit by radio and confirm by courier as received. Expect accurate report 26th on American effectives in France. All other conditions unchanged.—No. 20.

The message put Elton on his feet, pacing the floor to relieve the tension of the import of the music. Three helpless vessels singled out for the submarines, their course betrayed to the rendezvous of the German secret service at 70 Koenigergratzerstrasse, whence it would be wired to Kiel. A promise of the schedule of American transports. Was such a betrayal possible? And information on American forces overseas to be furnished the 26th—tomorrow. Elton remembered his piano lesson on the morrow. Was it from him they expected the information?

He regained his self-possession and returned to the office of the assistant provost marshal. Walters sat on a desk, over the prisoner. He looked up and searched Elton's face. Ferdinand sat masked in indifference and ignored Elton's reentry.

"So you are a composer, monsieur?" Elton asked.

"Did I not so inform you?" inquired Ferdinand impudently.

"A composer, eh!" Elton's passion broke its leashes in spite of his effort at self-control. "A red composer—a composer of fiendish discord, of treachery, of wanton slaughter. Well, this time it is you who is going to dance to your own hellish music, for it's your own death march you've composed and nothing can save you from it!"

The blood faded slowly from the Spaniard's face as Elton spoke. His eyes became stark and he swallowed convulsively, clutching at his throat, goaded by a sudden agonizing fear of execution.

"You—you can't send me to the guillotine on such evidence," he gasped, now unnerved completely, and speaking as if to fortify himself against the gripping fingers of terror.

"You're right," sneered Elton. "We can't send you to the guillotine—for the simple reason that we don't use the guillotine. But I can promise you that you'll dance to your hell-music at the end of six feet of good American hemp before we're through with you!"

The prisoner's mouth fell open, his eyes stared in an agony of fear at the threat. He thrust up his hands as if he would shut out the dire picture that was dangled before his sensitive imagination. Elton leaned close to him.

"That is," he said in a tense, low voice, "unless you want to undo your treachery and tell us freely those who are more guilty than you—such as that tigress who has gotten you into this trap, Mademoiselle Dupre. Come, do you wish to save yourself?"

A deepening perplexity clouded Elton's face as he saw the amazing effect of his words. Ferdinand's ague ceased almost instantly at mention of Mlle. Dupre. His mouth snapped shut, the craven fear in his eyes gave way to a fire of defiance. Then, as suddenly, he became calm and forced a smile to his chalky face.

"There is no one else—no one. Your charge is ridiculous," he said in the voice of a man who recites a speech. "Your reference to Mademoiselle Dupre is treason. Try me if you think you can. I have nothing more to say."

It was one o'clock when Elton finally reached his billet at No. 194 Rue Carnot. For over two hours he had grilled the violinist, but after the moment when Ferdinand took refuge in the strange stoicism that Mlle. Dupre's name had incited, there was no shaking him into a second funk. In fact, his stubbornness merely hardened under continued questioning.

"Sure, I thought he was going to tell everything he knew," muttered Walters as they entered their room. "Then he shuts up like a clam. I'm thinking it must of been a case of love for that jane you mentioned, because I noticed it was right then he closed."

"On the other hand," said Elton, "it might have been that her name reminded him of his training—to keep mum if arrested on suspicion, and particularly not to fall for the old game of bartering for his life. The whole German spy system is sworn to get any man who turns traitor, even if they have to follow him through Hades. And you may be sure that Ferdinand had plenty of good coaching in that nest at No. 200."

"But when do we nip that bunch, Cap'n?" Walters asked. "I mean, if it's any of my business to be asking. Right now don't look too soon to me."

"It's one thing to locate this slippery kind of Boche agent, and I've learned it is another thing to supply the evidence for conviction," said Elton grimly.

"But that cipher stuff, sir? Ain't that enough to hang the whole crew on?"

"It will be evidence enough to settle Ferdinand, but I'm going to look things over a bit before—"

Walters had opened the windows and the strains of music were wafted in to Elton's ears. He stopped speaking abruptly, turned out the lights and went to the window to listen. The same music, clumsily played, almost discordant with the over emphasis of bass notes. The intermittent roll of the kettle drum, the rasp of the bass viol, the shrill wail of a violin. It stopped briefly, then struck up again.

For half an hour he listened, a growing tension in his face. Finally he turned from the window in sudden decision, his mouth a taut line, his eyes agleam.

"I think I understand something now," he said in a tense whisper. "If I am not badly mistaken, there's more mischief at No. 200 than any one has ever suspected before!"

"We're going over, sir?" At hint of action, Walters reached intuitively for his Army automatic which he had laid aside for the night.

"Not tonight," said Elton quickly. "The game is too big now for snap action. I'll need the night to plan it out, and tomorrow night's piano lesson to catch the exact lay of the land."

Fox Elton knew the time was at hand for the boldest stroke yet—the play upon which would hinge success or failure of his long and patient stalk of the music master of No. 200 Rue Carnot.

CHAPTER VI

TRAPPED

AT EIGHT o'clock of the next evening when he raised the brass knocker at M. Domremy's front door, Elton's face was carefree, his manner jaunty and he had every outer aspect of a man who faces nothing more critical than the patient eye of a piano teacher. For several hours, since completing the final detail of his course, Elton had strolled leisurely about on the Avenue Philippe-Auguste. That course he deemed a most essential part of his entrance, since he had no doubt that the keen intuitions of Mlle. Dupre might sense any high tension and divine its cause.

M. Domremy answered the door with his usual somber scrutiny, but instead of taking Elton at once to the piano, bowed him to a large chair. He saw that Mlle. Dupre had preceded him to the place and sat in the room apparently absorbed in an edition of "La Vie Parisienne." But she looked up almost at once and extended her hand without rising.

"My dear Monsieur Elton," she exclaimed, "I am so terribly upset. Something must have happened to my dear Ferdinand. Can you imagine what it could be that keeps him away?"

Her face was as ingenuous as her words as she said this. Elton looked at her sharply, but observed no indication of suspicion.

"You refer to the violinist who was here yesterday, mademoiselle?" inquired Elton with polite interest.

"But yes, monsieur, and I fear he may have been detained." He saw that she was regarding him intently. "Because he is of a foreign land the stupid secret police and gendarmes annoy him frightfully at times. Can you think of anything more distressing?"

"War brings us all many annoyances, mademoiselle," said Elton.

"But how cruel to annoy poor Ferdinand," protested Mlle. Dupre. "Do you not think that if Ferdinand were not what he appears, he would tell me, monsieur?"

"But remember, mademoiselle, if any man had such a secret as that on his soul he would hardly take even his closest friends into his confidence," parried Elton, smiling faintly.

"I do suppose that would be a bit—a bit stupid, monsieur?"

Elton was puzzled not only by the drift of her questions, but by a subtle change in her manner. He could have sworn that there was a touch of banter in her voice, that she laid for him some deft verbal trap. The four young men of M. Domremy's orchestra filed into the room and seated themselves without invitation.

"A bit stupid, as you say, mademoiselle," assented Elton.

"If it should chance that the secret police have molested Ferdinand," Mlle. Dupre proceeded, "may I count upon your assistance in having him returned?"

"Mademoiselle must remember that I am without rank or influence in Paris—even if I knew Ferdinand well enough to vouch for him."

"Ah, but is he not one of your associates at my dear uncle's school, monsieur?"

"I'll be glad to see what I can do in the interests of justice, of course," assented Elton, his perplexity growing at the unreasoning conversation.

"Thank you so much, monsieur!" exclaimed Mlle. Dupre with an animated smile. "I shall hold you to your promise."

The sharp rasp of an unseen buzzer interrupted. With it flashed into Elton's mind the purpose served by the blind beggar at the corner. Mademoiselle sprang to her feet.

"Some one at the door, dear uncle," she prompted M. Domremy. "Oh, for some reason I have a frightful foreboding today—of something terrible about to happen."

The door flung open upon her words without waiting upon M. Domremy. A detachment in uniform stamped in. Elton gasped at the unexpected invasion that met his eyes. Four soldiers of the American military police, two French gendarmes, pistols in their hands, their faces set in determined purpose. Mlle. Dupre faced them heroically.

"Messieurs!" she cried, her hands upraised in horror. "What is the meaning of this? What authority is given you to storm into the home of my uncle, Monsieur Domremy?"

"Save yer gab, Feefee," sneered a tall gaunt soldier wearing the chevrons of an American M.P. sergeant. "We're pinching the whole lot of ye for Boche spies—and no back talk goes."

"Spies?" echoed the Frenchwoman. "How dare you!"

"Sure thing—spies," reiterated the sergeant. "We've got the band of ye spotted and they're wanting ye at headquarters toot sweet! Come along now—we ain't wasting no time on ye."

Mlle. Dupre turned despairingly to Elton.

"Can't you do something?" she cried. "You know who we are—you can vouch for us."

"Are you intending to search the place, Sergeant?" Elton asked quietly, ignoring Mlle. Dupre's appeal.

"Search nothing," leered the other. "I'm a-taking all of ye, and no talk out of youse, me fine Fritzy."

"One moment, Sergeant," Elton spoke up with authority. "You're going a bit fast. It may interest you to know that I am Captain Elton, U.S. Army, counter-espionage operative, and I'm in charge of this case."

EVEN as he spoke, Elton was conscious of a swift change in the faces about him, in the tension of the room. The sergeant's bullying manner gave way to a malignant grinning silence. One of M. Domremy's musical disciples lighted a cigaret with studied indifference. Mademoiselle turned from the invaders and walked close in front of Elton, her eyes burning with a sinister fire.

"So—you have introduced yourself at last?" she taunted him. "And I thought you said only a moment ago, in speaking of poor Ferdinand, that it is so—so stupid to tell too much. You have fooled no one, monsieur, unless yourself, and such was your conceit I knew it would be so simple to have you confirm with your own lips what I already suspected."

Elton, winning a short, sharp struggle for complete mastery of himself, smiled coldly back at Mlle. Dupre and with mock gallantry bowed his acceptance of defeat.

"At your disposal, my dear lady," he said coolly. "You appear to have gained the complete advantage with the aid of your bogus soldiers."

"Not complete as yet," mademoiselle rejoined. She turned to the leader of her uniformed henchmen. "Will you be so good, my Sergeant," she added, "as to go with your men to the billet four doors to the west and advise monsieur's comrade that his captain wishes him to report here immediately?"

At a motion from Mlle. Dupre, two men searched the prisoner and took Elton's Army automatic. He offered no resistance since he saw that any show of fight would be immediately fatal. His deepest anxiety now was for Sergeant Walters and he cursed his own lack of foresight in leaving him in the billet under strict orders not to leave until Elton returned or summoned him.

In a few moments the knaves in American uniform returned with the unsuspecting sergeant. Walters looked about with wrinkled brows at the strange spectacle that confronted him. But he discreetly held his tongue.

"Do you not recognize your dear captain when he stands before you?" mademoiselle baited him.

"Captain?" Walters asked her, blinking rapidly. "I don't know no captain."

"It's no use, Walters," Elton spoke up. "We're trapped this time—and I am very sorry I had no way of warning you."

"Trapped, eh?" Walters' gray-green eyes narrowed and his whole body bristled.

He looked slowly about the room, a calm estimate of what forces he must reckon with. Then he leaped back and his hand reached for his Army automatic.

But cunning eyes had read his thoughts and strong agile bodies were full upon him before he could clear his weapon. Elton threw his authority into the struggle lest Walters precipitate his own death.

"Stand aside, Sergeant," he commanded. "Resistance is useless. We are beaten this time and we may as well accept the fact gracefully, as becomes gentlemen."

"Very good, sir," panted Walters. "But far's I'm concerned myself, I'm for taking on their whole gang even if they have got the edge. Dying in action ain't no disgrace."

"And now, *Monsieur le Capitaine Américain*," said Mlle. Dupre, with an insinuating smile, "we are ready to listen to the eloquence of your pleas. No doubt our mercy shall be tempered by the sweetness of your words."

"The advantage is all yours, mademoiselle," said Elton. "I am not so stupid, at least, as to ask mercy at your hands."

"You are rather impudent, my dear Captain," sneered the woman. "Perhaps an inspection of our hospitable home will soften your temper a bit."

Her eloquent hands signaled an order for Elton and Walters to be escorted up the stairs, under close surveillance. The prisoners were brought up just inside a small bare chamber on the second floor, an inner room devoid of furnishing of any kind, or of windows.

"You may see for yourself, messieurs, how pleasantly equipped we are to entertain—traitors." Mlle. Dupre addressed them from outside the heavy oaken door, which was still open. Elton saw that her mouth now responded to a humor of cold, wanton cruelty. "It is for you to decide whether you prefer the fumes of our best mustard gas in this chamber to the more pleasant perfumes of June time."

"That should be no difficult matter to decide," smiled Elton, refusing to be broken into a display of the sickly fear that gnawed within him.

"Not, my Captain, if you are a man of your word. Did you not assure me a few moments ago that I could count upon your help in securing the release of my dear Ferdinand?"

"But you have not explained what miracle I can perform that will restore Ferdinand to you. Perhaps, for all I know, he is happily embarked upon his honeymoon?"

"You trifle with your own life, monsieur! I am in no humor for empty chatter. You need only to write a brief message asking that Ferdinand be released and sent to you here. Come, what is your answer?"

"But suppose I wrote such an order—what reason have you for thinking it would be honored, mademoiselle? Surely you don't think all Americans are fools?"

"If it is presented by your assistant here—your comrade—there will be no question."

SERGEANT WALTERS swore violently.

"I'm carrying of no Boche notes," he snarled. "If mustard gas is the most civilized thing you hell hounds know how to use, go ahead with the stuff. It'll not be strong enough to keep me from cussing you with my dying gasp."

Mlle. Dupre held her temper at Walters' profane outbreak of defiance.

"It will serve the same purpose, my Captain," she addressed Elton, "if you go yourself and bring Ferdinand. I will be quite content to hold your comrade as hostage. And, if you succeed, you may have your lives, provided you will add to the price one bit of useful information which I require."

"Which is, mademoiselle?"

"Nothing more important than the present effective American strength in Europe, a fact upon which I know you can shed full light. What is your answer?"

"May I have a few moments in which to think over so serious a proposition, if you please?"

"How many minutes do you ask?"

Elton glanced at his watch.

"Say twenty minutes, mademoiselle?"

"Entirely too long, my Captain." She motioned to have the heavy door swung and concluded through a remaining crack, "I will allow you five minutes. If you have decided in that time, three raps on the door will open it. Otherwise, *messieurs—bon voyage!*"

"Sure, sir, and we seems to have stubbed our toe this trip, Cap'n," said Walters with a plucky grin as the door clanged shut. "Well, there's a saying, Cap'n—the good dies young."

"But they have offered us an alternative, Walters," Elton replied glumly.

"Yes, and if my hands'd been free and it wasn't a woman talking, I'd 'a' pasted somebody in the face for that insult," retorted Walters hotly.

"You've forgotten, Walters, what I once told you—that discretion is the better part of valor."

Elton paced back and forth across the room, his eyes at the dial of his watch. One, two, three minutes passed. He halted near the door and watched the busy little second hand tearing away. Three minutes and a half. He had small doubt of what the end of five minutes would bring—a lighted mustard gas cylinder dropped into the room—death by the most frightful strangulation.

He raised his hands to beat at the door. Walters cried out to him in warning.

"You ain't doing it, Cap'n! You ain't doing it!" shouted the veteran non-com. "Not for my worthless hide. Ain't we as good a man as Streib, Cap'n? Did Streib show the feather!"

Elton's hands crashed against the door, three heavy blows in rapid succession. There was an instant response of sliding bolts. The door opened. M. Domremy's stolid face confronted them.

"Tell mademoiselle I will do as she says," said Elton.

"You will speak to mademoiselle for yourself," said M. Domremy.

He opened the door only wide enough to admit Elton, then closed it upon Walters and jammed home the heavy bolts.

There was a light of triumph in Mlle. Dupre's cold eyes as the prisoner was escorted downstairs into her presence. But she did not dilate upon her victory, evidently well content for the time being that there was hope for the rescue of her valued henchman, Ferdinand.

"You will write the note in your own way, *Monsieur le Capitaine,*" she announced, signaling to have his guards step aside.

"May I relax for a moment?" pleaded Elton. "The events of the past few moments have been a severe strain upon my nerves—I need a moment or two in which to pull my wits together."

"I can well imagine," said mademoiselle. "But you must make haste for what do I know of how they treat my dear Ferdinand?"

"You may be sure, at least, that they will not treat him to mustard gas," Elton responded pointedly.

Mlle. Dupre gave a bitter laugh.

"Would you say that the guillotine is more merciful, *Monsieur le Capitaine?*"

A MOMENT later she ended his brief respite by handing him pen and paper with an imperious gesture, directing that he write at once the order that was to secure Ferdinand's release.

"Write carefully, monsieur," she cautioned him, "since one of my men shall accompany you and at the first sign of treachery, your comrade here shall die, and you will find here only an empty house when you return."

"I will give it my very best thought," said Elton. "I can say that my friend's life means quite as much to me as Ferdinand's appears to mean to you."

He sat with pen poised for many thoughtful moments, then wrote a few words, paused for reflection and wrote briefly again. Finally, under mademoiselle's urging, he finished it.

"Before you leave," she announced, with a nod of approval at what Elton had written, "I think it wise to test your sincerity. A part of our bargain, my friend, was that you give me certain information. I will receive that now."

"You mean the American strength in Europe, mademoiselle?"

"And your troop estimates for the remainder of the year."

"At present our strength is just short of 800,000 men, mademoiselle. But priority has been given to infantry and light combat troops such as machine gunners. By the end of the year we expect to have more than two million men in the field."

"Excellent, *Monsieur le Capitaine,*" exclaimed the woman. "I have good cause to know you tell the truth. What you say merely confirms information we have received this very week. I am content now to send you for Ferdinand."

"But, mademoiselle, I have been thinking," Elton interposed. His eyes were glued upon the note he had penned. "Perhaps I should write it over, for I observe my hand was not steady at first."

"It is now close to nine o'clock, monsieur. There is—"

"But it will take only a few moments to have it right, and I will promise to be finished here by nine."

Again Elton bent over the order of release that he was to carry to M. P. headquarters for the release of Ferdinand. He paused several times and scrutinized it intently. A French chime clock began beating out the hour of nine in deep throated tones.

Amid the sound of the chiming bells, the alarm buzzer rasped a sudden omen. Mlle. Dupre looked up nervously. The others exchanged startled glances. A moment later the door burst open again.

From the street poured an olive drab avalanche—a score of American military police—a bristling sergeant in advance, pistol drawn. The counterfeit sergeant arose and attempted to flash a French automatic into action. A spurt of flame sent him to the floor. M. Domremy whipped a naked blade from his walking stick only to have it shattered at the hilt by the cool aim of a soldier who wore the badge of an expert pistol marksman. The others succumbed promptly to irresistible force. Mlle. Dupre alone maintained something of her *sang-froid.*

"I find, mademoiselle," Elton paused to say reassuringly, "I find it necessary to make a slight change in our plan. Instead of bringing your dear Ferdinand here to you, I shall take you to join your dear Ferdinand. You can not say I have altogether broken my word."

Leaving half of his men to secure the prisoners, Elton led the others up the stairs on a thorough search of the rendezvous. He paused only an instant to draw the bolt and throw open the door behind which Walters was imprisoned, then ascended to the third floor. The reward that met him there confirmed his most vivid expectations—a high powered radio sending station, the strident buzzing of whose keys had been masked by M. Domremy's discordant orchestra.

"I imagine, Sergeant," Elton chuckled, "that the Comte de Grenelle will find some little embarrassment laughing this little Boche plaything out of court when we take that haul of spies up for trial by a general court."

"Yes, sir," agreed the M. P. sergeant, looking sharply at the captain and wondering what on earth he was talking about.

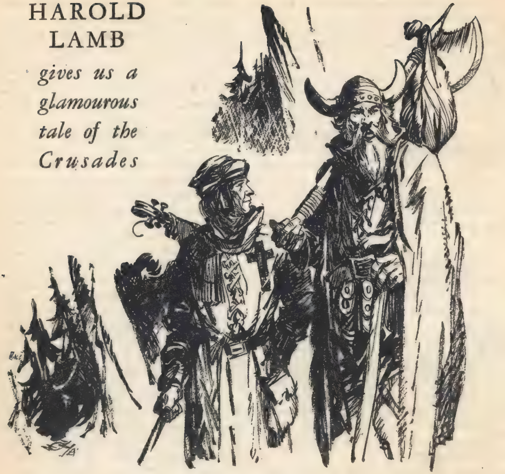
On the top landing, as he emerged from the radio room, Elton came upon Walters, who stood in wait for him, his features heavy with some strong emotion. Walters drew him out of earshot of the others.

"Sir, I'm hurrying to beg the Cap'n's pardon," he said feelingly. "Sure and I'll never forgive myself for thinking the Cap'n was showing the feather. I should of known on the spot, sir, the Cap'n wasn't dumb enough to let—"

"No apologies in order, Walters," smiled Elton. "It was a mighty close rub and all due to my dumbness, and nothing else. I underestimated by a full thirty minutes the time our M. P. detail was to follow me in, and I'm afraid if the Lord hadn't been on our side the blunder might have been fatal to both of us."

HAROLD LAMB

gives us a glamourous tale of the Crusades



The FARING FORTH

THE ARMY of Jerusalem was retreating. For a month it had been fighting, without luck. It was a small army, and there was no other to defend Jerusalem against the advances of the Mohammedan powers, in this year of the Lord, 1107.

Horses wearied by a forced march of twelve miles past the hills of Bethlehem, the column moved through a stifling defile of red rock, in a haze of dust. The men rode in sullen silence, aching under the weight of their chain armor—six thousand of them. Somewhere, back in the gorge, the calif's host, thirty thousand strong, followed in pursuit.

Few lances rose through the dust. Most of them had been broken or thrown away, with the saddlebags and shields. The great banner of Baldwin, the king, was furled and carried between two knights of the Hospital, and Baldwin himself lay gaunt and fever wracked in a horse litter with a cloak hanging over him to keep the sun from his head. Only the gilt cross of the patriarch was still uplifted.

> "O give him a high, swift horse—
> God grant that he ride well!"

A hoarse voice chanted the words, and men turned their heads to stare or curse. Sweat soaked saddles creaked, and the dull *clank-clonk* of sword sheath against iron shield kept time to the thudding trot of the heavy chargers.

> "Belt him, and give him a sword to wear,
> And call him a cavalier!"

Ahead of them—two leagues more of the dust and sun glare—stood the lofty wall and the great towers of Jerusalem. There they could dismount and throw themselves down in the shade and sleep. And some of them could forget their wounds. Two leagues more.

They had left their dead behind them, and the wounded who could not ride. They were thin and patient—these men of arms who had come overseas to defend the Sepulcher of Christ. They were the foreign legion, the host of *Outre-mer*. Tall Normans with a restless eye for plunder; red bearded Rhinelanders; heavy, drowsy Saxons; placid fighters from the clay marshes of Flanders; wanderers from England and Vikings of the dragon ships, who followed the wars as gulls follow sails at sea. Slender youths in the once white surcoats of the Hospital, who had once gazed longingly at the pennants of the older knights; gray headed swordsmen who had managed somehow to live through the First Crusade. Iron men, they were called.

Then the rock walls opened out. The hills on either side sank to low swales. The head of the crusaders' column came out into a shallow valley and halted. Staring into a blinding sun, the leaders shouted hoarsely.

"Come up, ye men of the Cross!"

A low ridge on the left, a rambling mud village and orchard, was held by a mass of Moslems—fresh warriors they had not met before. They could not see clearly through sweat smarting eyes, but the roar that came from the ridge was like the thunder of a long wave.

"*Allahu-akbar*—Allah is greatest."

Now the column had expected to dismount within Jerusalem's walls before sunset, and it was weary. Crowded in the gut of the defile, it began to be afraid—not of blows and the hurt of dying, but of being cut off. The men could not see what was happening, but whispered tidings ran back from the head of the column—whispers that ten thousand Arabs had come over from Damascus and cut them off. That a trap had been set for them and baited, and the army of the calif was hastening after them to close the trap.

A Norman duke in the advance looked along the empty road, through the quivering air of the valley bed, thought of the column taken in flank by the onset of these new, uncounted foes, reflected that the crusaders, themselves, could not form for a charge in the defile—and led the way at a gallop to the ridge on the right, opposite the Arabs, who shouted insults but made no attempt to charge.

Some of the desert swordsmen, splendidly mounted, galloped down to the road and taunted the crusaders to come down to single combat. But the six thousand had no heart for that. They dismounted and stood by their spent horses and looked around them. They saw a network of gullies behind them—rock ridges overgrown thinly with thorn and gray tamarisk. No way to get through there. They would have to go back to the road. They were out of the defile but not out of the trap, and they were weary men standing by spent horses.

"Look, ye men of *Outre-mer*," laughed the red headed duke who had led them hither. "Here is the jousting ground and yonder are the lads who will break a few swords with us." And he whispered to himself, "By the life of God, the way out of the lists is narrow."

At the far end of the valley the road entered a gully again. To gain the road to Jerusalem, they would have to deal first with the mass of horsemen opposite, only a quarter-mile away. Evidently the Arabs were waiting for the pursuing host of the calif to come up, through the defile the crusaders had just left, and close the trap.

Baldwin, the king, looked around him and slid from his litter, getting to his feet with an effort, for his right hip was stiff with dried blood.

"We will go together, messires!" He coughed, and then his voice rang out clear. "By God's aid we will mount and charge yonder men and drive them and so—fare forward again."

He staggered, as fresh blood rushed from the wound in his groin; his knees bent and his knights caught him and laid him back in the litter, unconscious. Baldwin had said the thing that must be done—to drive the Arabs away before the calif's men came up. But Baldwin could not lead a charge.

The princes and captains gathered together where the standard had been lifted and argued in curt whispers. They could not rouse the men, who had seen Baldwin fall and felt sure that this was an omen of evil.

The red duke went to the bearded patriarch, who had girded a sword over his bishop's robe.

"Spur them on, my Lord," quoth he, "or these, thy sheep, will be fanged by yonder wolves."

"Let them rest," the man of the church responded, "for they are weary, methinks. And I will pray that aid may be given us."

So he knelt by the uplifted cross, and the barons perforce knelt with him, while the sun dropped lower and the raucous shouting of the Arabs dinned into their ears. But the men in the ranks knew that no aid could reach them, and time was passing.

And then a miracle happened.

THE SUMMONS to the crusade had not reached the far Northland, because no tidings came to that snow country where the fire of the furnace of the gods filled the winter sky of nights. Beyond the Russian land it was, and beyond the last bishop's house of Finland. And this was the roving place of Skol, the pagan.

A man slayer and a trouble maker he was. Six feet and half a foot he stood, his heavy shoulders sagging forward. He had the corded arms of the forest dweller, and the broad and quiet face of a child. His blue eyes, half closed, seemed asleep when he was not fighting. Red was his skin from long ale drinking, and yellow as bright gold his curling beard and plaited hair.

On his skis he wandered from one lord's hall to another, in his leg wrappings of sable fur, and deerskin shirt studded thick with round iron knobs, and over that his white reindeer cloak. He carried a bundle slung to his ax.

Skol had one weapon and one skill. His battleax was four feet long, with a ball of iron at the butt of the shaft, to keep his hand from slipping when blood ran down it. The head of the ax had two parts to it, an iron hammer like a blacksmith's hammer, at the back, to smash armor. And a curving blade to hew through bone and flesh. In Skol's long arm, the sweep of that ax head could slice a man's body through. That was his skill, and he lived by it—by this power of man slaying.

His fathers had been Vikings, men of the dragon ships, but Skol followed the wars of the Northmen on land. Many were the gold arm rings given him by earls and princes, whom he had served as liege man. And no man said of him that he was a rear ranker, because he would take his stand where the blows fell hardest, his ax shearing a circle about him. When he passed his word, he held to his word.

But the women had ill to say of him, for his long ax had sent many a husbandman to the stone cairns, and he had left many a house with a burning roof. Skol the man slayer, they called him. A rover, a wrong doer. And they said that he would not find his own death.

Because he had no friends except the ale drinkers of a night—most men shunned him otherwise—and because he was alone in his wandering without talk to pass the hours, Skol brooded at times about one thing. He had no rightful liege lord of his own. No one who would sit by him and summon the neighbors to a high tide, if he should happen to be dying.

That was the one hour when a man ought not to be alone. To lie in darkness, without bright torches, or the chant of minstrels, or fellows to sit by with their ale and listen to what words he might care to say. True, Skol was no talker. But in the long silences of his wanderings, he fancied that he would like some little conversation in the hour of his faring forth from life. A bit of celebration that the ancient men and the minstrels would remember him by. That was his hankering, until the morning when he met Daimen the Finn on the forest path—a little man, a minstrel, with his fiddle in a sealskin bag on one shoulder, and a broad scarlet cross upon the other.

Skol had never seen a cross worn like that before and when he had stopped the Finn he asked what sign it was.

" 'Tis the sign and seal of an oath I have taken," said the minstrel. "And by reason of it I am faring forth to a new land, by a long road."

And Skol would have passed on, had not Daimen been afraid of the great axman.

"Hail, ax clasher," he said again. "Has the word come to you that there is a truce here in this land, and an end of quarreling?"

"That would be a strange thing," Skol remarked.

"Well, they are making the truce, and the weapon men are going out to take the cross."

Skol put down his bundle in the snow and leaned on the pommel of his ax. So, here were tidings.

"What cross?" he asked.

"This—"

Daimen pointed to his shoulder, and when Skol remained silent, he explained how everywhere the priests were summoning men to join together in one army and to march to a place called Jerusalem, where was the Sepulcher of the Son of God, and to free this from the enemies of God who had taken possession of it. Followers of Mahound and Anti-Christ, these enemies were. The quarrel was a good quarrel, Daimen said, and a man would be well rewarded. Past all counting, the priests had said. So he had taken the oath to go and they had given him that fine red cross—velvet, sewn with silver thread.

"Who is the leader of this host—he who will hire the liege men, and pay what is owing at the end of their service?"

"Well, ax clasher, every lord will look after his own followers, and as to pay, I suppose it will be as it always is. But they do say that this new host will be led by One who is invisible, and *he* will see that every jackman gets a just share of the spoilings and sackings."

All this bewildered the man slayer, who could think of only one thing at a time; but it stirred his curiosity and he turned back to go with Daimen to the next hamlet on the road. And after an hour he asked if it were true that the weapon men were faring forth to this new war.

Daimen said it was indeed true. For months and years they had been taking to their weapons, in Flanders and Northman-land. Nay, even new married women were going, and old wives packing the carts to take to the long road; priests were arming, and children begging to go.

"Jerusalem," Skol mused, fingering his beard. "That would be far off, like."

Daimen thought it was farther, even, than Russia; but he had a good pair of skis, and he had been told to keep due south, to find it.

When they stuck their skis in the snow by the tavern and tramped through the stable yard to eat supper, Skol gripped the minstrel's arm with iron fingers.

"Do you think, belike, these priests would make me a cross if I took the oath to serve this new god of battles?" He thrust his hands in his belt and nodded slowly. "I would like well to see this weapon drawing."

THE PRIESTS of the hamlet made no objection. But they made Skol kneel before them and place his hands together and swear that he would journey on to Jerusalem, and not turn back for any reason whatever until he had reached his destination. They were glad then, because Skol had caused many deaths in the land, and the women rejoiced to be rid of him. Only Daimen was doubtful at first, about his new companion of the road.

"See you, ax clasher," he remarked, "there is another agreement to be kept. Until you have purged yourself of sin in the blood of the paynim, you are not to lift weapon or hand against a fellow Christian—like myself? Is that also agreed?"

Skol's drowsy blue eyes looked down on the little minstrel.

"It has never happened," he said slowly, "that I raised hand against a comrade."

So they set out together with their skis upon the forest road that ran south.

They did not find Jerusalem that winter, or that spring. Nor did they find the roads filled with marching men. They did get out of the forests, and summer overtook and passed them in cleared land where the log churches had devils painted on their doors and the women stacking hay stared at the bright ox horns on Skol's helmet. Skol could not speak the language of these people, but the Finn had a way with his tongue, especially when he talked to women, and he explained to Skol that they could not go on.

"South of here is the open steppe, where the pagan hordes wander, ay, and Satan grazes his horses. They have never heard of Jerusalem in this place."

"Did she tell you how we can go around the steppes," the man slayer asked, "this black browed chit who walks with you after vespers?"

Daimen looked uncomfortable. It was becoming clear to him that they would have trouble in finding a road that led to Jerusalem. And it was pleasant to be with this Russian girl who had round arms and strong, full lips that smiled at him in the twilight.

"I will ask," he assented. "But it will take time and great skill with words to find out all we must know."

So Skol waited at a crossroads ale shop, sometimes selling a gold armband to pay for his ale and sometimes helping to get the grain in from the fields. Daimen was his voice, and he could not go on without the minstrel, even if he had wanted to leave him. But after the snow came again Daimen appeared suddenly at the tavern—the woman's tongue had grown too sharp for him—with tidings.

"A merchant's sledge train is setting out with furs, to go to the west," he said. "And they will take you for a weapon man in the guard. We must make haste, because there in the west we will find out more about Jerusalem."

But it was a year before they could leave the service of the merchants, and the people who met them on the roads scowled at them, not understanding their questions. All they could learn was that at the edge of the sea to the south was the great city, toward which all travelers went. And thither they begged and fought their way, having no more gold left, through endless hills. Daimen's blue cloak was stained and faded, and he no longer tried to tune up his fiddle at night. The men here had dark faces and went barefoot or in saddles, except the nobles, who galloped past or stood in chariots. The crowds became greater on the road, as the two crusaders went farther south.

The sun blazed overhead, and brown robed pilgrims went swinging by. Of them Daimen asked one word, "Jerusalem?" And they turned and pointed to the south. Until the wanderers saw from the summit of a hill a mighty white wall with square towers, and beyond the wall the gleam of sunlight on gilded domes. White walls and green trees, and the deep blue of the sea beyond.

"Well, the priests did not lie!" cried Daimen.

They found it a rich city indeed, with strings of laden mules passing through the gate, under the eyes of strange guards in gilded breastplates and shining silver helmets. Skol stopped to stare at them, but Daimen pulled him on, and they wandered through alleys, past the stairs of marble churches, and a column of carved marble with a rearing horse atop it, and a bearded king on the horse. But it seemed to Skol strange that the king had nothing on him but a kind of long shirt; and no saddle beneath him. Daimen pulled him along until they sniffed the damp reek of wine, up from a cellar shop.

"Come," cried the little minstrel, "it hath been a long road, this, and they will not grudge a tankard of wine to crusaders, although we have no coins or gear to pay for it."

They sat on stools in the cool gloom of the shop, and pointed at an open cask, and a fat man with an oiled beard bowed to them and hastened to bring two jugs. They drank more, and Daimen said it was well they had come to Jerusalem at last. When the tavern keeper held out his hand, the minstrel pointed to the cross on his shoulder, and the oiled beard spat out harsh words. The tavern keeper waddled out of the shop and came back with a tall and glittering figure following him—a weapon man wearing over one shoulder a red cloak, and carrying in his free hand a short ivory baton. Daimen had never seen such a splendid man, even a prince, before; but Skol looked up frowning.

The stranger spoke words they knew.

"Hail, ye far faring fellows! This Greek is saying ye have robbed him."

And the prince sat down between them and looked into the jugs. They were empty.

"What is this?" said he.

Daimen's tongue was loosened, now that some one listened who understood his words, and he told the tale of his crusade, until the stranger, a man of mild manner, motioned to the tavern keeper to bring more wine.

"Have done," he cried. "Have done, little man. 'Tis a whine and a plaint I have heard overmuch. Sure it is that Jerusalem was beset and captured by the crusaders years ago. And now that the weapon smiting is at an end, every spindle shanks weaned of woman is marching on Jerusalem. When the fighting was ahead, they were all for being pilgrims, too holy to fight; and now, by Thor's thunder, they are all cross bearers, ready to eat and drink their way to the holy city."

"Well, we're here," said Daimen after awhile.

The stranger paid the Greek and spread his long legs before him, his hand on his hip.

"And where," he asked, "is that?"

"Jerusalem, and a fair—"

"Some call this Byzantium, and some call it Constantinople, which is to say the city of Constantine; but it was never Jerusalem, for *that* is in the country of the Turks, far to the south."

Daimen stared.

"But this is what we looked to find—a queen of a city, with gold in its walls and jewels to be picked up—"

"'Tis so, little man. I am from Denmark, and I have served the Emperor of Byzantium eight years, and every month, now, eight gold byzants are paid into my hand, with a largesse for hazardous fighting, and tribute from the shopkeepers like this dog sired Greek, and a gift now and then from the slavers. The women are the finest of the world, and when my service is done I'll be given land in Asia, with slaves to till it, and the rank of centurion of the mercenaries."

Then Skol spoke.

"'Tis not Jerusalem."

"Better for thee, ax wielder." The strange officer smote his hip. "Six thousand Northmen are in the emperor's pay, and we have a place—in my company—for a man of weapons, who can wield steel, shoot a shaft and back a horse."

Skol considered all this. It was his skill, to do this.

AND HE stayed. Six months later Daimen had a new cloak, and he had learned the names of the wines and the places where the heaven descended emperor held weekly games and beast slayings for the multitudes; he knew the luckiest chariot racers and the best horses of the hippodrome. But then he went home one evening to Skol's barracks and found the man slayer clad again in his old leather and dull steel cap.

"Have the mercenaries disbanded?" he asked. "Are you dismissed from the service?"

"Nay," said Skol. "I have enough silver money now to buy passage in a galley. We will sail to the holy land this night, and the ship will not lose its way as we did."

"Are you mad, ax clasher?" cried the minstrel. "Such a fine figure as you were, a decurion of the ax bearers! Jerusalem was captured long since—are there not pagans enough in Byzantium to give drink to your thirsty steel?"

Skol shook his head, thinking of one thing at a time.

"There is an oath between us," he responded, "that we should fare forth and not turn back from Jerusalem."

"An oath!" But the minstrel looked long at his comrade, for by now he had come to know Skol's moods. "Is your mind settled upon that?"

"Aye."

Daimen sat down, fingering his new red cape. Long he brooded, and began to rock back and forth upon the stool. At times he had the foresight upon him, and this was such a time.

"That will not be good! That will be a road to sorrow, and a breaking of shields, and a sating of wolves upon the bodies of men."

But he went, after awhile, to look for the stained blue cloak with the crusader's cross.

When the afternoon sun beat down upon them, they stopped to sit in the shadow of a broken wall where weeds grew among great stones. They were passing through a half ruined place in the foothills. Sweat stung their eyes and the heat was like a blanket that could not be pushed off.

They slaked their throats with wine from Daimen's stone jug and chewed at pieces of the bread and shreds of garlic that they had brought from the seacoast, and they listened to the clanging of bells. Sheep jostled past them in the dust. Through the dust women hastened with covered heads. Skol's drowsy eyes noticed the dome of an old church made of square stones, and beyond it a height of black rock. Beyond, he saw only bare ridges and green patches of olive groves.

He was sleeping when a voice roused him.

"I would relish some of the garlic, my sons."

A pock marked priest, a little father of the Russian land, had stopped in front of them. A man, Skol observed, with lean, starved flesh and a dirty robe. Daimen handed up some of the garlic stalks.

" 'Tis a long day since we have heard a word we knew," he said. "What is this ringing of bells here?"

"More sorrow!" The yellow teeth of the bearded Russian bit into the garlic greedily. "They are praying for the armed host."

"For what?" Skol asked, sitting up.

"For the army of Jerusalem."

The priest swallowed and would have gone on, but the man slayer rose and laid hand upon his shoulder.

"Where will we find these armed men?"

The priest pointed behind him, along the street.

"Go through that gate and follow the road for two or three leagues. God knows if you will find them." And he padded off hastily.

Skol leaned on his ax and reflected.

"I am thinking that the weapon men of Jerusalem have fared forth, and it may well be that they are coming hither to raid this place. However it may be, we are near, and we will join them."

The minstrel followed, grumbled because Skol had had a nap and he had not slept at all. He grumbled more when the heat of the clay valley rose into their faces, and he pointed out that not even the cattle herds were astir in that hour. The doors of the hamlets were deserted, and so was the road that wound through the rocky swales.

The road led them out into the barrens, where the pastures and the villages ended, and they walked in silence through narrow gullies until they plodded up a rise and stopped to look at what lay before them.

An open valley, the slopes rising on either hand like an amphitheater. The empty road running through the pit of this amphitheater to the shadowy entrance of another defile at the far end. Daimen thought it was like the great stadium of Byzantium where the emperor held his games. Only the heights of this valley were full of armed men. To his left he saw lines of men in dull armor standing by horses, some of them kneeling around a high, gilt cross—Christians, they must be.

To his right, among thickets and huts, were massed horsemen he had never seen before—bearded men in cloaks of all colors, wearing turbans and glittering helmets. He tried to count them and gave it up, because he could not count over twenty and there were hundreds of twenties yonder. The faint roar of their restlessness was like the surging of surf against a shore. Skol put down his bundle between two rocks and stood up, to tighten his belt and swing the long ax once around his head.

"Well," Daimen said then, "we have come in time for a battle."

SKOL began to walk down the road into the valley. He was going to join the men under the cross, up yonder; but the slope near him was covered with brush and it would be easier to climb from the bed of the valley. So he went down the road. He strode along swiftly, because he knew that once those horsemen were in motion, a man on foot would have trouble getting to where he could strike a blow. But the men up there made no move toward their horses, although several Moslem riders were down on the midway point of the road, jeering at them.

Then the jeering stopped. The three Arabs had seen Skol and Daimen, and in a moment one of them urged his horse toward the wanderers. He could make out the crosses on their mantles, and he thirsted for the honor that came to a follower of Allah who slew the first infidel in a battle. Moreover the fall of the tall Christian with the horned helmet would be an omen—a sign of victory for the banners of Islam and doom for the crusaders.

"Come into the brush!" cried Daimen, who had already leaped nimbly up the bank from the road.

But Skol's blue eyes, no longer drowsy, gleamed with fierce exultation.

"By Thor's thunder!" he growled. "I have not walked for two years to turn my rump to the first foeman. Stay there, little man, for this road is no place for the like of you."

While he spoke he lifted high the iron shield on his left arm, and his right hand gripped the long ax shaft half way to the head. The oncoming rider had challenged him, and never had the man slayer held back from a challenge. Daimen shivered, and the Arab came on at a gallop, his scimitar swinging by his right knee, his small round shield well out on his rein arm.

Once the Moslem shouted, kneed his horse to the left and leaned over to slash down with his scimitar. Beneath the flashing arc of steel, Skol flung up both arms.

The scimitar clanged against his iron shield. But the long point of the great ax came up inside the Arab's shield and caught the man beneath the beard. He rose in his stirrups as a stricken deer starts up, and the giant Northman staggered, holding to the ax shaft with both hands.

The horse ran on with an empty saddle, and the quivering body of the Arab dangled from the ax point that had pierced to the bones of his head. Before Skol laid it down, all life had left the body.

"Ha!" roared the Northman, drawing free his weapon carefully and wiping each hand in turn on his hip.

Daimen cried a warning, but the man slayer was watching the other two Moslems who reined toward him, scattering dust and stones in the haste of desert clansmen to avenge a death. They came together, steel swirling over their hooded heads, as merciless as striking wolves, and no single man could have stood his ground in the road before them.

Skol did not. He swung his ax slowly about his head from left to right, his knees bent until he could have struck the foam flecked muzzle of a horse. Then he leaped to the bank at the left of the road. But as he leaped he whirled and struck, the ax extended in his long arms.

The hammer head brushed aside the sword of the nearer horseman, crushed in the light leather shield and crashed into the man's face. And the Arab rolled over the horse's tail with his skull shattered.

"Allah!" cried the other, reining in and wheeling his horse swiftly. And swiftly he slashed with his scimitar.

Yet the man slayer was watching the blow. Skol's blue eyes were cold, his breathing unhurried as the sweep of his great arms when he stepped down into the road again. This was his skill, this weapon play. He caught the stroke of the scimitar upon the curved ax head, and the thin steel blade snapped with a sound like the breaking of ice.

The Moslem flung himself to the side of his saddle and pulled his horse away, but the ax reached after him with a twisting motion. The watchers on the hillsides—and thousands were watching now—saw him ride back a little way, apparently unhurt, while Skol looked after him. Then the rider wavered and slid to the ground, with one side of his groin torn out.

A cry rose from the Moslem ranks, and was echoed by a deep throated shout from across the valley. Three horsemen had gone down under three blows.

"Come back," cried Daimen. "Is it mad ye are?"

Skol was not mad, but the mist of fighting was upon him. His own song was in his ears, and *that* was a song of the breaking of sword blades and the clashing of shields. No more foemen remained on the road, but others sat their horses up the hill. Skol shouldered his ax and went up to them, singing. Daimen stumbled after him.

For a moment the valley was silent except for the chanting of the giant. Then a score of Arabs rode at him. And the six thousand crusaders climbed into their saddles. The cross of the patriarch was lifted. No horns blared and no leaders cried them on; in silence they broke from a trot into a gallop, gripping sword and spear. They had seen one man with the cross on his shoulder marching against an armed host. They had been desperate before, but now they were ashamed.

The charge rolled across the valley and roared as it came.

"*Christ and the Sepulcher!*"

Eleven thousand Moslems flung themselves against that charge. And they were beaten back by the long swords of the crusaders. The cross wavered, and then went up to the crest of the Arabs' hill; then the mailed host wheeled and charged back again, and broke up into fiercely smiting groups that sheared through the throngs of the desert men. Still the crusaders pressed on, and the Moslems scattered and rode off, their green banners merging into the sunset.

Daimen, watching from the nest of rocks where he had taken refuge, had been able to see Skol for a time, when the twenty horsemen first closed around the giant Northman; he saw Skol's ax rise and fall, and come up red in a new place, as the man slayer leaped, twisting himself among his foes. A horse reared there, and a hooded head flew from its body. Then the rush of the Arab charge swept over the spot.

And Daimen was running toward it, through the last ruck of the fighting, when he heard horns blaring. The crusaders were trotting into ranks on the hillside about him. But they did not wait for the ranks to be formed. Down in the twilight of the defile they had left that afternoon resounded a clamor of cymbals and kettledrums. And in the valley road appeared the first groups of the calif's army that had pursued them hither and had hastened forward, hearing the tumult of battle.

The men of *Outre-mer* looked, and put spurs to their jaded horses. It was a mad kind of charge that slid and stumbled and plunged down upon the head of the calif's column. The bewildered Moslems were caught standing, and crushed by the flailing swords—driven back upon their fellows in the ravine, lashed into headlong flight. Then darkness, lighted by torches where the crusaders sought for their wounded.

The red duke caught Daimen by the shoulder and blew the blood clots from his bearded lips.

"By God's grace, find me that mate of thine—he who showed the way to us this day."

Bells tolled and chimed, ringing out a lament for the fallen and exultation in the victory; light streamed from the doors of the churches, although the hour was near dawn. The voices of men chanted a *Te Deum*, "We praise Thee, O Lord—"

The long hall of the hospital of Jerusalem was filled with laymen and warriors bearing candles and lanterns among the wounded. On the bed by the fireplace lay Skol, his leather and iron cut off his body, and the great slashes bandaged. A white linen sheet was thrown over his body, and his sweat matted head was propped on a soft velvet pillow.

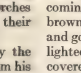
"Skol," cried Daimen, "this is Jerusalem that we passed through without knowing it."

The blue eyes turned toward the minstrel, and Skol made a sign that he understood. A dozen knights—he knew them by the little shields in their belts and by their spurs—were sitting around the bed, drinking wine. They looked at Skol when they spoke, and one of them lifted a tankard. The same Russian priest who had spoken to him that afternoon was coming toward the bed slowly, and his brown robe was covered by cloth of silver and gold. More priests followed him with lighted candles, bearing something covered with a white cloth. They said things in Latin, and the knights stood up.

The priests even gave Skol a little wine from a silver cup and a small piece of bread. When they went away, Skol turned his head. Two tall candles had been placed a little behind his head, one on each side.

He looked at them, and at the men sitting by men. He listened to the distant chiming of bells and chanting, and his clotted beard wrinkled in a smile.

"'Tis a good place," he whispered, "a good place, and a fine sitting-by—for my dying. A man can not ask more than that."



Continuing

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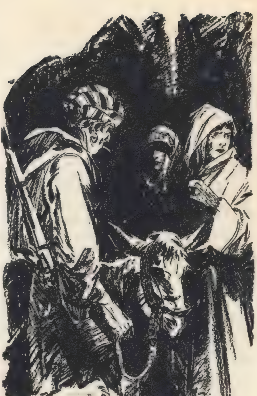
New Novel of the Treacherous Khyber Pass



The INVISIBLE

ANGUS—nicknamed Gup—McLeod, six feet two, Scotch, resigned his commission in India, horsewhipped Major Glint and thereby became a fugitive from the British Empire.

Of old Scotch stock, he was too decent to turn against the Empire, even when he was offered the commandership of the troops of Jullunder in the Hills. Jullunder is a small state near Khyber Pass; and it assumed great importance when the Emir of Afghanistan threatened to swoop down on India.

Tom O'Hara, of the British secret service, disguised himself as a *mollah* and penetrated Jullunder, where he met Gup. Instead of arresting him, he begged Gup to accept the generalship of Jullunder's troops—for the sake of India. Gup could perhaps save Jullunder from disaster, and maybe even help to rout the Emir of Afghanistan.

But Jullunder was by no means a passive state. Its troops were weaned on wind and barley, reared on plunder; and its ruler, the beautiful singer, Lottie Carstairs, who had married the late rajah when he visited London, was ambitious. Jullunder had as pretentious dreams of empire as had Afghanistan.

Moreover, the erstwhile cynical Gup was falling in love with Lottie Carstairs, now the ranee. He planned to win her admiration by the stubborn technique of thwarting her own impossible plans of conquest.

Jullunder's troops were concealed in the fastness of a honeycombed mountain as inaccessible as Gibraltar. Guns, ammunition, horses and men were waiting.

GUNS *of* KABUL

A Russian who had fled the revolution had concocted poison gas. The troops were loyal to the ranee. Gup was loyal—up to the point where her designs threatened India. Rahman, her lieutenant, was loyal, and also his aide, Pepul Das. But the ranee's secretary, Harriet Dover, and an Indian woman of the household had planned to betray the ranee into the hands of the emir.

Jonesey, a strangely unprincipled Welshman who had gone native in the Hills, was mischievously planning some sort of coup for his own diversion. But Jonesey was so malicious that he was ready for anything. So, when Gup ordered Jonesey to cement the poison gas chamber and seize the Russian who had manufactured the poison, Jonesey smiled and promised to obey.

Life's mystery is this: that what appeared
As strength is weakness, and the long drawn length
Of loneliness, so aching dark, so feared,
So comfortless, shall bring forth strength.
Then Magic needs no Merlin. Then the shroud
That shuddered in the loveless wind of doubt
By instant alchemy is armor! And aloud
Hope shouts within, though none else hears it shout.

CHAPTER XVII

"I DON'T CARE A DAMN WHAT YOU THINK OF ME. IT'S WHAT I THINK OF YOU THAT MATTERS."

AT A RECEPTION that night in the throne room Gup was formally presented to what Jonesey described as "the inside works"—a momentary, whispered lapse from Islamic dignity. Jonesey was on his best behavior, acting his favorite rôle of fanatical mystery man. He had secret news for everybody's ear, which no one was to tell to anybody else; and he told no two persons exactly the same story.

"One of the Russians—he who makes poison gas—is suspected of treason. Gup Bahadur ordered him arrested. It is said that the Russian was offered many rupees to lose his poison gas and kill us all. Gup Bahadur saved our lives."

The news spread through the crowded chamber faster than Jonesey could whisper it. It multiplied itself in the fertile soil of feverish imagination. One version was that a British spy had wormed his way into the caverns and actually paid the Russian two *lakhs* of rupees in paper money; Gup Bahadur had found the money on his person.

But an alternative, more plausible tale was to the effect that the Emir of Afghanistan had promised to appoint the Russian a governor of a province if he would poison the ranee and all her principal adherents. That story was made circumstantial by the fact that the emir's personal representative was present at the reception, with two men in attendance on him who had reputations for intrigue. And Gup Bahadur had been seen emerging from a cavern near where the Russian was known to mix his chemicals; the Russian had vanished; he was said, by whom nobody exactly knew, to have been bricked and cemented up, to perish of his own foul mysteries.

And where was Rahman? And where was Pepul Das? It was known that runners had been sent to summon the army to its secret gathering place; and on a peak that could be seen for fifty miles around there was a huge fire burning—the anxiously awaited signal to make ready. There was magnetism in the air.

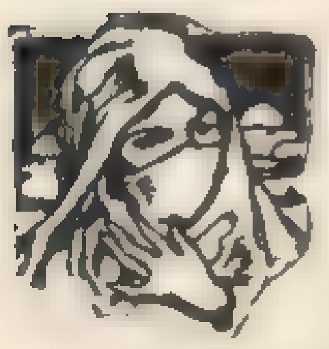
The ranee was superb but not communicative. Through the Turkish form of veil that she had adopted for official purposes, she looked more lovely and mysterious than any princess from a story of the Thousand-and-one Nights; above its subtly curving edge her eyes were like Allah's secrets, marvelous and never to be wholly understood nor exactly the same from one breath to the next—and yet always the same in essence, always glowing with the light of an unfathomable riddle; they outshone her jewels, that men spoke of in the same breath with those of the Queen of Sheba, whom Solomon once envied.

All her companions were there, veiled as she was and making themselves agreeable in an aristocratic way to men who knew of no more thrilling entertainment than to be mystified by ladies whose gauzy veils were like the gossamer that rests on flowers. They have not yet forgotten, those Moslems, the lure of the vaguely perceptible, near, unattainable. It is only the known and possessed that turn to weariness and disillusion. Wise men prefer illusion while it lasts.

Harriet Dover and one companion were beside the ranee, on chairs on each side of the throne. In deference to the ranee's wishes Gup had dressed himself in Pathan costume, even to bare feet in crimson slippers. He only lacked a beard to make him look like a descendant of one of those warrior chiefs who led their conquering hordes from the North in olden days; the turban increased his stature; the loose line of the white smock seemed to add to the muscular bulk of his frame; the flowered crimson cloak hung from his great shoulders like a Roman general's, and he wore in the sash at his waist a jeweled Persian scimitar-of-state. Because he was hardly conscious of what he was wearing he stood with inimitable dignity.

The ranee hardly spoke to him. He had plenty of time to observe all the other occupants of the room, particularly a Russian in smoked spectacles with a mustache clipped in the German fashion. He noticed that the Russian talked with the emir's representatives and that Harriet Dover watched the conversation as if she burned to overhear it.

After awhile the ranee made Gup stand on the edge of the low dais, where he acknowledged the bows of the men who filed past, introduced to him sonorously by Moustapha Kara Khan, the black bearded captain of her bodyguard. He was announced as Gup Bahadur, without other title or explanation; and nothing was said at that time, by her or by any one else, about his being commander-in-chief.



THAT ceremony over, for awhile he mingled with the guests, sipping coffee and talking politely about nothing in the world that mattered. The Afghan emir's men seemed to avoid him, drifting away as he drew near. He had opportunity to watch the ranee's face, and he was aware that Harriet Dover's eyes, at no time lusterless and now made doubly brilliant by contrast with the veil she wore, watched every movement he made and noted every person with whom he spoke. He began to wonder whether he could trust Rahman to set spies watching Harriet Dover; he was almost sure it would not be safe to trust Jonesey to do it.

When he backed Rahman into a corner at last where he could question him without being overheard he could see that Harriet Dover's eyes were watching him intently. He saw her make an almost imperceptible signal to Jonesey.

"Rahman," he said, "you spread a net for me and caught me. Nevertheless, I would like to be your friend. But how shall you believe that unless we can share one article of faith between us? We are neither of one race nor one religion."

"By my beard, I ask no better measure of my manhood than your friendship," Rahman answered. "How shall we pledge each other? There is not an oath on earth that is fit to bind two men who look into each other's eyes. I like you, Gup Bahadur. If my life is as safe in your hands as yours in mine, we two should live long, if Allah wills."

"To you," said Gup, "I will open my heart, if you will open yours to me."

"Speak, then," Rahman answered. "And may my tongue be torn out and my heart the food of town dogs if I lie to you."

"Which do you serve? This vision of a kingdom in the Hills? Or the ranee herself?"

"By God, I might have known there was a rock in the road! I serve the ranee. What of it?"

"I also."

"Well and good, Bahadur, and we believe each other. What then?"

"Why did you drag me into this? It was not because you feared your own lack of ability."

"What else should I fear?" asked Rahman.

"Harriet Dover?" Gup suggested.

"Then we understand each other! Nay. Not her, but the ranee's love for her! Lo, I went forth looking for a man for her to love, and I think I found him! That other woman is a devil—she and the Bibi Marwarid are twin devils. It was Bibi Harriet Dover who first thought of this madness. And as Allah is my witness, she has driven the roots of her cunning to the bottom of all this business, so that none can trace them or drag them forth."

"Do you believe she is loyal to the ranee?"

"Allah! Not I. She is loyal to nothing and to no one but the devil in herself."

"Can you prove that?"

"Nay. If I could prove it I would have denounced her long ago. Who shall prove anything against her? It is to her that all our spies report. Little by little she has gathered the power into her hands, though without the appearance of it, until none knows what she is doing or how to prevent her. And she lies to the ranee; but who shall prove she is a liar?"

"What about Jonesey?"

"He is a mischief in a man's skin. Not a devil, but a mischief. Jonesey is like a moth that turns forever to the brightest light; but to him a bright light and amusement are the same thing; and what amuses him most of all is to see into the bowels of intrigue."

"What is the secret of Harriet Dover? Ambition?"

"Of a sort, yes. For herself, nothing; money and outward show mean nothing to her. But she loves power. By Allah, she loves the feel of it! She is never amused like Jonesey; she craves power as some men crave opium, and she hardly sleeps, she hardly eats for craving it. When she has some, she demands more. And she is more jealous than a money lender of his money. It was she who set that Russian to brewing poisons."

"What was her purpose? The gas was an afterthought?"

"God knows it was—and a bad one. This I think, although I have no proof of it: she had a plan to poison the emir. That might have put the throne of Kabul at our mercy. I would not take oath that she is not still planning that. But I think that she has an alternative plan. She is one of those to whom nothing is of any importance except winning. And I think she thinks that this army of ours can not win because we have no artillery. Therefore, you will notice, three of the emir's men pay us this unannounced visit. And I swear—for I have taken pains to know it—that she has exchanged messages with the emir these many weeks past."

"Who are her special pets?" Gup asked him.

"The Russians—that one yonder commands a thousand of our men."

"Do you believe she would betray the ranee?"

"Aye, and herself also in the end, for the sake of the feel of having done the unexpected thing. Long ago I would have slain her—aye, and she me—had not each of us feared the ranee's anger. For I tell you, our ranee is royal and not to be trifled with. Her weakness is that she trusts and believes no tales against her chosen friends."

"Set a spy on the emir's men," said Gup. "Can you set spies on Harriet Dover?"

"I doubt it."

"Try. Meanwhile, let us annoy her in every way possible. To me, who knows, perhaps, but little of such matters, she looks overwrought. We have been speaking of horses."

"True," said Rahman, and they separated, moving among the crowd.

THE CEREMONY was a bore. It was one of those necessary social gatherings that serve to gild the lily of intrigue and make it look like shopworn cabbage. One by one the notables were guided to the dais, where they stood in conversation with the ranee, exchanging compliments, avoiding any reference whatever to the dangerous business in which they were all engaged. Many of them, in fact, had no other reason for being there than to be able, afterward, to brag to envious underlings of being in the ranee's confidence.

Others were there to be made to believe they were in her confidence, and those were led aside by Jonesey or the treasurer or the captain of her bodyguard, or even by one of her veiled and subtly scented women, and were asked for advice on minor problems that had already been solved in secret. If they guessed right, they were flattered and told their advice would be taken; if not, their answers were received with solemn assurance that they would be well weighed and considered. It was the ordinary ancient game of politics, made picturesque by costume and important by the use of an air of mystery.

At last the ranee dismissed them with gracious dignity. But Gup, the treasurer, Jonesey, the captain of the bodyguard, Rahman and the emir's three men grouped themselves as if they meant to file out last. And when the other guests and the servants had withdrawn, the ranee threw off all that air of mystery, although she kept her veil for the sake of the emir's men, in whose presence she began by reprimanding Gup, in Pushtu:

"You already start imprisoning my experts? How many will be left in a week from now to do their duties? I have ordered that Russian released."

Gup smiled. One glance at Harriet Dover's face explained that speech. He wondered again whether the ranee knew what deadly stuff the Russian had been brewing. However, he waited before taking up the challenge. Impetuosity and patience had entered into deadly combination in him.

The servants carried in broad divans and spread them with cushions, then withdrew, taking away the throne chair. The ranee nestled comfortably, several of her women grouped around her, and the others whispered together within call, amid heaped cushions in a window recess. Gup and the other men spread themselves Roman fashion on divans arranged in a semicircle facing the low dais.

"*Bakheir braiyed,*" said the ranee, which literally means "come safely", but the purport of it was that the emir's representatives had leave to speak on any subject that they pleased and without formality.

Their chief sat upright at once, cross legged. His name was Rafik Khan—a man with sallow skin and Semitic features, of middle height and middle age. His neat black beard was trimmed in the European style into a point, but he possessed more Oriental dignity than did either of his companions, both of whom bore the obvious marks of European education and the half contempt for their own native culture that too often goes with it.

"I was chosen," said Rafik Khan, "for this honorable mission because I speak English with ease, as my companions do also."

The ranee nodded.

"My august employer," he began again, "his Majesty the Emir of Afghanistan, does not consent to negotiations as between one equal and another. By my hand he has sent gifts, which I have delivered; by my lips he presents his compliments, which are sincere, and which he will be proud to have conveyed when I report to him the cordiality of my reception as his agent and the almost overwhelming dignity and beauty of her Highness the ex-Ranee of Jullunder, with whom I have been authorized to discuss certain possibilities—and," he added, "to whom I am instructed to make certain definite complaints."

"Let's hear the complaints first," Gup suggested.

Rafik Khan glanced sharply sidewise at him, hesitated, almost visibly removed one layer of his suavity and adopted the suggestion.

"Great liberties have been taken with the emir's name. Supplies not ordered by him nor intended for him have been dispatched up the Khyber, met by men pretending to be *sowars* of his Majesty's army and conveyed to this place. This has led to sharp misunderstandings with the Indian government. Furthermore, there has been a persistent outpouring of rumor from the ex-Ranee of Jullunder's headquarters, to the general effect that his Majesty the Emir of Afghanistan contemplates invading India. This appears to have caused unrest in India, and that again has led to strained relations with the Indian government. Subjects of the emir, known by him to be disloyal and even openly rebellious, have been received here and placed in positions of trust. All these are matters that admit of no denial."

"Who wants to deny them?" asked Harriet Dover. "The emir intends to invade. We know that. Our spies are as good as his, or better, and we know most of what goes on in Kabul. What interests us is: What does the emir offer us as an inducement for our friendship?"

Gup seized his first chance to be irritating.

"Pardon me," he objected. "Are you using the 'we' in the editorial or the royal sense? Or are you presuming to speak for everybody present? I ask for information."

Rafik Khan, too, thought he saw his chance to drive a wedge into the ranks opposed to him.

"My mission," he said, "is to the ex-Ranee of Jullunder."

But the ranee only smiled; over the rim of her veil she was watching Gup's face. Gup thought that he read satisfaction in her eyes, as if a long sought solution were dawning. Harriet Dover sat bolt upright.

"If you had listened when you were introduced to me," she said, "you would have learned that I am secretary of state to her Highness." She appeared to decide to ignore Gup for the moment, although when she glanced at him her eyes glowed with anger.

RAFIK KHAN resumed.

"His Majesty the Emir of Afghanistan lays claim to all this territory, as having belonged to former emirs and as being neither effectively occupied, protected or administered by the Indian government, who have in fact no right to it whatever. These caverns are the emir's property, and nine-tenths of the men who occupy them are his men, who owe him allegiance."

Rahman laughed—a risky thing to do in Moslem lands unless there is overwhelming violence in reserve with which to back the laughter.

"Why then, in the name of Allah, doesn't he control his men?" he asked. "Tomorrow I will show you fifty thousand who repudiate him!"

"What does he offer?" asked Harriet Dover.

"First, he demands that recruiting shall cease among his subjects," said Rafik Khan. "To recruiting in the Punjab he offers no present objection. Second, he demands that the ex-Ranee of Jullunder and her officers shall accept and acknowledge his rule and shall send to Kabul hostages as guarantees of allegiance and good faith. Third, he demands that his own general shall be put in command of these troops. Subject to those stipulations, he is willing to appoint the ex-Ranee of Jullunder to be titular governor of this province, two-thirds of its gross revenue to be retained by her administrative purposes and one-third to be sent to Kabul."

"By Allah! Is that all?" asked Jonesey.

"Does he propose himself to name the hostages?" asked Gup.

"Why, yes," said Rafik Khan. "It stands to reason that unimportant hostages would be no guarantee. It is suggested that the ex-Ranee of Jullunder herself might consent to reside in Kabul for the time being. A suitable palace would be provided for her and she would be treated with all possible respect and consideration. She would be provided with a bodyguard from the emir's own picked *sowars*."

At last the ranee spoke—

"And what guarantees does the emir offer in return?"

Rafik Khan made solemn answer, with the air of one who mentions almost superhuman goodness and generosity.

"The hand of one of his own royal relatives in marriage. The title of princess," he added. "And for her ladies, husbands also, each according to her rank."

It was a breathless moment that followed that pronouncement. Nobody cared to speak for fear of letting fall some phrase that might start an explosion of anger. However, Gup decided that an explosion, of sorts, might suit his purpose and was well worth risking.

"May I speak?" he asked.

The ranee nodded. She had changed color. She was biting her lip.

"I suggest that Miss Harriet Dover might be sent to Kabul. How many wives has the emir? He might care to add to their number. As a member of the emir's harem Miss Dover's recommendations might be presumed to have considerable influence with us."

His eyes, that met Harriet Dover's, laughed at her, although his face was almost somberly serious.

"You beast!" she exclaimed below her breath; and Jonesey wriggled.

Rahman watched Gup as a cat does a mouse, not moving. Gup whispered to Jonesey—

"Who invited the emir to send this envoy?"

"She—Harriet Dover did."

Gup chuckled. Harriet Dover began whispering to the ranee with almost savage emphasis, the Indian lady on the ranee's left hand leaned closer to listen. Suddenly the ranee spoke, with restraint.

"While we take time to consider and frame our reply to these proposals I trust that your Excellencies may rest comfortably in the apartment furnished for you."

Jonesey summoned servants. The emir's representatives bowed solemnly and let themselves be ushered from the room. Then there was long, tense silence, unbroken even by deep breathing until the ranee removed her veil, which was the signal for everybody to begin talking at once.

"What does it mean? What does the man mean?" she asked, as if utterly mystified; but Gup noticed the gesture of her right hand that invited another woman to sit between her and Harriet Dover, who was forced to make room.

Then the other women were invited forth from the window recess and in a moment Harriet Dover found herself so crowded that she chose another divan, with another woman, several paces distant. She was nearer to Gup than she had been and in a position now to turn her shoulder toward him with obvious intention.

"By Allah! It means war!" said Rahman, nudging Jonesey in the ribs so sharply that he winced.

"Who put these ideas into the emir's head?" the ranee asked. "Have I become so cheap a thing as this? Who asked the emir to send envoys? Did you, Harriet?"

"I did not."

"Then in the name of God," Rahman demanded angrily, "why do we sit here hesitating for an answer? I say march on Kabul!"

Harriet Dover smirked at him.

"Without artillery?"

She was trying to appear as self-assured as ever; but to Gup, who was watching her closely, she appeared more mortified than did the ranee. Clearly, something had gone wrong with her calculations.

HAIDAR SINGH, the treasurer, who had held his tongue magnificently hitherto, now smiling as if remembering how often he had said the same thing, remarked:

"It costs more money to stand idle than to do business! It is all out-go now—no income! No one but ourselves is ready. It would be cheaper to strike at Kabul first, and there would be less risk. In Kabul there are money and munitions—"

Rahman, roaring again:

"By Allah, every *mollah* in the land despises that weakling emir. Have at him, I say!"

Harriet Dover was whispering to Bibi Marwarid, the woman who shared her divan. Suddenly she stood, to call attention to herself and gradually silence fell, because all knew that her authority was second only to the ranee's.

"This ought to be discussed privately," she said, "before ideas are all scrambled in this way. Talk about war with Kabul is ridiculous, as well as treacherous and stupid. There is nothing but female jealousy and fear underlying this first offer from the emir. His Syrian wife has dictated it. Undoubtedly the emir's agent has a second offer up his sleeve, which he will produce now that he has saved the Syrian woman's face."

"Music! Let us have music!" said the ranee, clapping her hands. "There is nothing like music to subdue the wrong sort of excitement and let the right sort usher in ideas. Music!"

But the servants, beyond the door, did not hear the summons. Jonesey had to go and give the order. Harriet Dover, with a glare of dark loathing at Gup, lay again on the divan and turned her shoulder toward him. Gup touched her shoulder, not caring to raise his voice. She faced him with sullen eyes. She was afraid of him; her intuition seemed to warn her that his honest, windy blue eyes understood her at last.

"How long have you known Lottie?" he asked her.

"Is that your business?"

"Some one on the inside must have aided Glint," he said, "when Glint was working to prevent her being Ranee of Jullunder."

Soft music stole on the senses and Jonesey returned to his place beside Gup.

"Some one," said Gup, "made it easy for Glint. And some one put the thought into her head of making herself ranee of a larger kingdom—some one who craved power and lacked a means of reaching it."

The music swelled into a rambling minor symphony that swept through curving corridors of vague thought, hinting at an unborn concept. Harriet Dover glared, her lips slightly parted, not visibly breathing—a dark pantheress, not to be tempted to speak or spring until she knew her adversary's purpose.

"Not she—some one else engaged that Russian to make poison gas. Not she—some one else released him after I had him arrested, some one who lied to her. Did you—" suddenly Gup drove his challenge home—"first think of poisoning the emir's wife, or did the poison put the thought into your head? I ask because I know you wrote secretly to the emir suggesting he should strengthen his own position by—"

"You insolent blond beast!" she exploded. "You liar!"

But Gup knew by the fear in her eyes that he had guessed too near to the truth to need to hesitate another moment. He stood up, and from the gallery the music swelled into galloping sound like the sport of the squadrons of forces that gather before storm bursts on crag and valley.

"May I speak?" he asked, and there was instant silence except for the ominous music.

The ranee nodded.

"Miss Dover," said Gup, "has given me information that for the moment, I think, should be secret. It should be discussed by you and her and me before any one else hears it. Is that your pleasure?"

The ranee glanced at the door of the silver peacock room. Gup nodded. She rose and all scrambled to their feet.

"Will you come with me, Harriet? Will you follow us?"

Gup let them cross half of the length of the room before he turned to Jonesey.

"Stand by the door," he commanded, "and see that no one listens. If I catch you listening, I'll kill you!"

Then with long, swift strides he overtook the ranee and, bowing, drew back for her the curtain that concealed the door of the room in which he had made his first bold bid for victory. This time he was going to strike so hard that there should be no doubt left who owned the upper hand and who would keep it, from that day onward.

* * *

There is a starry tide of cosmic sweep
Whereon paired harbor lights of red and green
Sway beckoning across that wondrous deep,
The stubborn rocks and sucking sands between,
Swift fleets of inspiration that the cry
Of a gallant heart went seeking—Valor red,
Green Virtue. Instant the reply!
But only homing whither harbor lights have led.

CHAPTER XVIII

"I AM COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF OF HER HIGHNESS THE EX-RANEE OF JULLUNDER'S ARMY."

GUP STRODE to the farther door, opened it, made sure there was no one in the corridor, closed it again and drew the curtain. The ranee stood at the farther end of the table. Strength seldom betrays itself; it is weakness that resorts to histrionics under stress. Her motionless silence might be marking indecision, but it was more dramatic than a thunderstorm. Harriet Dover, the tips of her ivory white fingers pressed against the polished teak of a chair back, stood between them. She, too, was on her mettle, no longer glaring; she had mastered herself for the moment—looked innocent, even amused. The stare with which she favored Gup suggested pity rather than defiance. But she was frightened; it was she who spoke first.

"I suppose you know," she said, "that this man agreed, before ever he came here, to betray us to the Indian government? I have proof of it and he just confessed it in the other room."

It was a way that was clever. It stole Gup's thunder. Counter-accusations and denials seldom have the force of a first indictment; a *tu quoque* is always feeble. And her calmness was in her favor; Gup was obviously boiling, and her bold lie staggered his sense of decency—a tactical mistake that gained her no more than a moment's triumph.

Men who have successfully tamed outlaw horses without the use of one unnecessary or unmeasured act of violence are to be trusted even when their indignation is not to be measured in terms of speech. And Gup had done more than that; he had led innocents to their death for the sake of a dim ideal. Taken in flank he might be, but not made to behave irresponsibly.

"I make no charge against you yet," he said. "Tell your own story."

She laughed.

"It is short," she said, "but not so sweet. I helped to catch you. I find that the fish wasn't worth the trouble. I know now what you are. That's all."

"I'll give you one more chance," said Gup. "It's probably not fair to expect a woman to—"

Unwittingly, without intention, he had touched her one sensitive spot. Meaning to be magnanimous, he stung her. She showed her hand. Blessed are the undiscoverable few who have no favorite obsession and no rift in their armor of self-control. Hers was inward rage against man's alleged superiority; rebellion against it was the basis on which she had built her whole campaign for power; she could not bear to have that foundation touched. She became a virago. Hatred overwhelmed her genius. It robbed her of even common sense and Gup let her exhaust herself in squalls of passion that burned her because there were no tears to make it human, and no concession to another's dignity to give it self-respect.

"What do you expect of a woman? Should she kiss you for incompetence? Love you for treachery? Praise you for being a pig in spurred boots? Oh, you swaggering cad! Oh, you hypocrite! Have we come all this way and built this temple to our own ideals, only to be mocked and robbed of it by a bird's-nesting Scots fool? You have no manners and no honor! You are supposed to be a guest in this place; you are given leave to go where you please and to see what you please because—incredible though that is—you were trusted! It was not I who trusted you. I had you watched. How did you use your liberty? Spying on us! Giving orders that you had no right to give! Undermining our authority! And I suppose you would call women the treacherous sex! Aren't you proud of yourself? You with a promise in your pocket of a pardon from the Indian government if you can betray us and ruin our plans!"

The ranee came straight to the point.

"Have you any such promise of a pardon?"

"No," Gup answered.

"Liar!" Harriet Dover drew a letter from her bosom; it was in a square envelope marked "O.H.M.S. SECRET." She glared at Gup, dared him, delightedly, to try to bluff his way out of an unknown new predicament and, since he said nothing, tossed the letter on the table within reach of the ranee's right hand. It fell face upward; he could read the typewritten address, to himself "in parts unknown—finder please forward." The ranee opened it and began to read it, but she only read one line before she folded it again.

"This is your private letter?"

"I can't say without first seeing it," Gup answered.

Harriet Dover slammed both hands down on the table.

"Read it—read it—read it!" she exclaimed excitedly. "Lottie, there's the naked truth in that letter! No, he has not seen it yet. A spy brought it; we caught the spy."

The ranee glanced at Gup again.

"Do you care if I read it? No, here, read it yourself first."

She held it out. He strode and took it from her.

"Oh, you poor weak thing!" exclaimed Harriet Dover. "That is the sort of misguided magnanimity that turns the ablest women into fools! Can you imagine a man behaving that way to a woman? Oh, well, let him read it. I have had it copied. If he tears it up it doesn't matter. Let us hear him lie about it!"

Gup unfolded the letter and instantly recognized Glint's determined handwriting, as legible as print except for the signature, which symbolized his character as perfectly as two initials and a name could do it. It was smothered beneath a bramble bush of flourishes; it almost left in doubt the identity of the author of the craftily worded pages.

Angus McLeod, Esq.,
Exact whereabouts at present unknown.

My dear sir:

After the disgraceful exhibition of cruelty, amounting on your part to a confession of moral turpitude, if of nothing less, and on my part to severely painful injury in the cause of duty, it could hardly be surprising if I should refuse to have further dealings with you except before such courts as deal with treason against the Crown. However, duty first. My personal suffering and my natural impulse to have you punished must be laid aside.

I am presuming that shame for your recent conduct has overtaken you and that natural reaction, such as may be expected of a man of good birth and education, may come to your aid in your bewilderment, which is probably intense. I am willing to help you, not for your sake or my own but for the sake of duty, and I will accept your promise to do everything in your power to upset the ex-Ranee of Jullunder's plans and to bring her to book for her crimes.

In return for that promise, and provided you live up to it with all your might and with every faculty you possess, for my part I will let bygones be and will use the full extent of my influence to procure for you a full pardon for your past offenses. There are numbers of our spies beyond the border. Any one of them should be able to communicate direct with me. I expect to hear from you.

Yours truly,
—A. E. GLINT.

Gup handed back the letter to the ranee.

"Read it," he said. "It was obviously meant to fall into your hands. It's as typical of Glint as the way he passes the plate in church on Sunday." He turned toward Harriet Dover. "Do you pretend to have evidence that I ever made such a promise to Glint or to any one else?"

Harriet Dover waited, her eyes triumphant, until the ranee had read the letter.

"I don't need to pretend," she said then. "Your own actions are enough. Lottie," she said, "Jonesey showed this man the charts in the No. 19 cavern. Two of the charts are missing! A man supposed to be a *mollah* from Samarkand or somewhere, who came in with the Shinwari chiefs but left them on the excuse that he wanted to say his prayers, has also vanished, leaving no clue except those missing charts, and this: he was seen to climb up on a ledge overlooking the gorge. It was on that same ledge that this man sat while he pretended to be having pangs of conscience! He and the *mollah* were there at the same time."

"Is this true?" the ranee asked. Her voice and her eyes were tragic, but that was entirely unintentional.

"You mean about the charts? I don't know."

"Is it true," she asked, "that you confessed just now to Harriet, in the other room?"

"No," Gup answered, "she lied about that, to protect herself from a confession that she made to me."

Then the dreaded question came. Gup hated to lie to her but he knew he would have to. He must protect Tom O'Hara at all costs. However, the actual literal wording of the question saved him for the moment from a downright lie. Not that it mattered. It maddened him to have to be forced to love and deceive at the same time. It was a rotten world; he supposed he had to be rotten like the rest of them.

"Have you spoken with any *mollah?*"

"No—excepting, of course, Jonesey. I believe he is one."

"Did you see those charts?"

"Yes. Jonesey showed them to me."

The ranee laid Glint's letter on the table.

"Where is the spy who brought this?"

Harriet Dover's shoulders suggested vague indifference.

"I understand there was an accident. He fell over the cliff."

"Why was he not brought to me?"

"He fell over the cliff, I told you."

The expression was still of complete indifference, but insolence had crept into her voice and it is the little, half heard nuances that direct thought into the very channels that the schemer fences to avoid. There was a sudden change in the atmosphere—as sudden as when hornets hum forth, vibrant in the stillness. The ranee's blue eyes widened and such anger glowed in them as burns up all irrelevancy.

"Harriet! I told you I will hold you answerable if men are murdered without trial and without even my knowledge! I forbade executions. War is one thing—unavoidable and sometimes honorable—sometimes righteous. But to kill men like vermin—I won't have it! Have you dared to order executions? Have you dared to permit them? Have you dared, after what I told you, to ignore them?"

"Do you mistake me for Omnipotence with myriads of eyes?" Harriet Dover retorted. "If you had your way your preventions would be worse than cure. Do you expect to govern savages by signing your name to a treatise on brotherly love? They have the law and the prophets. They don't need you for that!"

BUT THE tide had turned and no sarcasm could hold it back. All kings, all queens are puppets to the extent that others build their thrones and others bring to them the filtered or polluted news on which their judgment must be based. But not even arbitrary rulers can be swindled all the time, and there is no more deadly danger than to let a man or woman of courage learn, or suspect that nominal underlings are actually stealing power under a cloak of lip-obedience to principles which they secretly despise and disobey. Gup smiled. He could see what was coming. The ranee saw his smile and read it rightly, because she was thinking of first principles, not of herself, and intuition surges along that channel.

"Did you say she confessed to you, Gup? What was it?"

Gup bluffed brazenly.

"Send for the emir's representative," he answered. And then, because he knew how little evidence he had and doubted that the emir's man would fall into any open trap, he bluffed again, turning on Harriet Dover—

"Why did you order the Russian released?"

"I didn't. She ordered it."

"Why did you ask her to order it? Were you afraid he might send some message to her? And be brought into her presence? And be questioned? Were you afraid he might talk about poison? And the emir's wife?"

"What does this mean?" the ranee demanded.

"This," said Gup. "That if the emir's Syrian wife should die—"

The bluff worked! Harriet Dover lost her grip on insolence and, in a well masked panic, took the defensive. She was not yet beaten. Gup knew she was probably more dangerous in that mood than in any other.

"Listen," she said. "If the truth will out, let me tell it. Mayn't we sit down?"

The ranee nodded. Gup pushed up the big chair for her, at the end of the table. He and Harriet Dover faced each other at her right and left hand. Harriet rested her chin on her left hand and Gup noticed that the chin was slightly undershot and longer than it should be; he wondered why he had never noticed that before. He laid his turban on the table; the thing bothered him. Harriet Dover drummed on the polished teak with ivory white fingers.

"You admit," she said, "that this was all my doing? I mean, the original plan was mine. I thought it out. I conceived it. It is my child. You fell in with the plan and lent your money, reputation, good looks and such brains as you have in return for the title of empress and the opportunity to put into practise certain principles that you believe are practical?"

"I do not," said the ranee. "I admit that I have listened to you—possibly too often. And that I have trusted you—perhaps not always wisely. My plan is one that I talked over with Jullunder before I had ever heard of you."

"Perhaps there are two plans," Gup suggested grimly. "Perhaps a cuckoo laid an egg in your nest."

Harriet Dover ignored him, or tried to. She leaned her elbow farther on the table, her eyes fixed on the ranee's.

"You will admit, at any rate, that I have done the work."

"I do not," said the ranee.

"Well then, most of the work. And you have approved of what I have done."

"Not always," said the ranee.

"You have given me authority—"

"Too much sometimes."

"And I have actually had authority to act as your state secretary in negotiations with prospective allies and—"

"Within limits," said the ranee, "subject always to my approval, step by step."

"But it has not been possible to keep you posted step by step. You surely know that. There have been too many wheels within wheels, and my time has been too occupied to permit my discussing with you every possible contingency before it happened. Think of the scores of instances where I have brought a finished negotiation to you, and you have confirmed it although you knew nothing about it until that moment. You knew there simply hadn't been time to waste on preliminary talk, so you trusted me—"

"Perhaps more than I should have done! However, I am listening."

"I have kept numberless plans in my head that I never mentioned to you, Lottie, because they were not yet ripe for discussion. But I have never once swerved from the main idea. I have lived with it day and night. I have thought of everything, including how to make you so strong when the time comes that not even the whole strength of the British Empire can unseat you. I know how you love peace and how you hope to impose peace on these barbarous people. But how can you hope to have peace if the Indian government should be only forced to make temporary concessions? That might happen. They might even yield the Punjab in order to gain breathing time, but you know very well you can't fight the whole British Empire forever. So I have kept my eye on the future."

"And she has tried to do," said Gup, "what every secretary of state with an unmarried ruler on his hands has tried to do since women were a bargain counter on the political market. But you will notice this difference: more experienced diplomats have had the decency to be frank about it with their principals. The long and the short of it is, she has offered you, money and army and all, to the Emir of Afghanistan—as his wife, if he poisons the present one—as his queen, if he happens to keep a diplomatic promise. And the emir has retorted with the offer of a husband from among his seedy relatives."

Harriet Dover almost spat at him. Her livid hatred froze the flow of blood, so that her face grew pale, her lips white and her eyes as darkly angerful as thousand year old amber.

"Liar!" she almost shouted.

"Send for the emir's representative," said Gup.

GUP KNEW that the only remarkable thing about her breakdown was that he had stumbled on her "crystalization point", as they say of metals. She had cracked. There would be no mending her. Lawyers understand the process well enough; the most imperturbable witness breaks down and becomes almost idiotic when skill or luck or coincidence lays bare the concentration point at which weakness has gathered itself. Genius induces overstrain along one line. The weakness sets up somewhere else. She tried blustering.

"Am I on trial?" she demanded savagely. "If so, I demand a jury of my peers—all women! No man is fit to accuse a woman, let alone judge her! This man in particular is simply Nietzsche's blond beast. He is incapable of thinking. He only has emotions. He is good for nothing but hard labor, or to hurl himself into battle—supposing he has the courage—and I doubt that!"

"No," said the ranee, "you are not on trial. I won't put you on trial. But what shall I do with you?"

"Do with me? You? Oh, damn such insolence! You with your vaudeville brains—you! Do anything with me! I could have made an empress of you, if you had had the sense to leave yourself in my hands. But you turn aside for that blond animal! Go and show your legs to London! Go and sing balderdash popular songs to the sons of tradesmen! It is not too late—you look more like one of Bourgereau's Psyches than you ever did! They'll talk about your goo-goo eyes, and you can marry a duke and join the church and be respectable, after you've grown sick of this fool! Try me—you? You couldn't understand me in a million years!"

"I suppose," said the ranee, "you have worked too hard and you've cracked under the strain. But I can't, just because I'm sorry for you, let my aim fail."

Harriet Dover leaned back in her chair and laughed, on the verge of hysterics.

"Fail?" she mocked. "It has failed! You went to pieces when you abandoned me for this insufferable cad! Never in all my life, until this minute, have I wished I were a man. Oh, if I were a man what misery I might undo! What a sword I would use! What a lancet I would let into the ulcers that are rotting the world's life! And I would show such fools as you no more mercy than the lightning has for fat sheep."

She was on the verge of collapse, drumming on the table now with the fingers of both hands. Gup strode to the door, opened it, almost caught Jonesey listening at the keyhole.

"Women!" he commanded. "Three or four of 'em!"

They were barely in time. Harriet Dover swayed in her chair and fell sidewise into the arms of one of them.

"Take her to her bed and call the doctor," said the ranee. "I will come soon."

WHEN the door closed Gup stood facing her and there was silence for such a long time that he began to count his breathing. He was in command now, and he knew it; but he was not sure yet that she knew it. He knew that in that minute the whole destiny of Asia was in his hands. There was nothing he might not do, with fifty thousand men to be hurled into battle—five hundred thousand craving to be led, on any sort of profitable foray, by the first man capable of leading—fifty million waiting on the plains of India to rise and welcome their latest conqueror. Nevertheless, he knew what he would do and not do. And he believed he knew what passed through her mind; she would try to take the reins now dropped by Harriet Dover. And her pride would enter in. She would wish to show the emir what it cost to slight the offer of her hand in marriage. He supposed any woman would feel that way.

He strode toward her. She was gazing at him, but she neither spoke nor moved. He supposed then that she was grieving for Harriet Dover and he felt awkward, regretting his own lack of skill in consolation phrases. He, too, felt almost sorry for Harriet Dover—almost, but not quite. Nothing could alter the fact that she was a dangerous devil and probably not yet well out of the way. He felt far more sorry for this woman who had trusted her and who felt all her womanhood stung by the emir's insolence.

"Oh, I know you!" she said suddenly. "You despise me as she did! I trusted her because I loved her. She has tried to trade me to an emir for his harem. What will you do, I wonder? You shall not despise me. I will not endure that."

"Lottie," he said, "what do you want me to do?"

She stared at him. It was the first time he had called her by that name. He saw the light in her eyes soften and glow, and then harden again as she controlled herself. He had to set his teeth. He would not—he would not make love to a woman to whom he must lie. Not if it broke his heart and hers too would he fail to keep that standard of behavior flying.

"I want you," she said, "for my friend. I need one rather badly." It was a wry, brave smile that she summoned. "Gup, you are seeing me at my worst. I don't mind, really I don't mind the emir's insult. But it hurts to lose Harriet Dover—and I think it hurts almost more to know how long I have half suspected her and refused to believe my own intuition because—Gup, I love my friends."

"What do you want me to do, Lottie?"

"Answer the emir! Command my army! I will find out what Harriet Dover has done, and undo it."

"If I answer the emir," said Gup, "I will defy him. And if I defy him, I will fight him."

"I wish that."

"You commission me to answer for you?"

"Yes. I wish it."

Gup, alone, strode through the door into the outer room. He strode straight to the dais. Rahman wished to speak to him, but he raised his hand for silence.

"Inform the emir's representative that we are ready with our answer," he commanded.

Jonesey went in haste to do his bidding. Gup, Rahman, everybody remained standing. There was silence for fifteen minutes, seven women staring at the men, and the ticking of Rahman's turnip watch as audible as a cheap alarm clock. Then the emir's representatives came filing in and bowed—to the vacant divan. The ranee was not to be seen, but a door creaked behind the curtain leading to the silver peacock room.

"I am commander-in-chief," said Gup, "of her Highness the ex-Ranee of Jullunder's army."

They bowed again. Jonesey and Rahman exchanged glances. The captain of her bodyguard looked better pleased than if he had been decorated on parade.

"I speak for her Highness," said Gup, "and I am authorized to answer, to the emir's insolence, that such terms as he has offered are beneath our notice, and we are no longer in a mood to bargain with him. I am authorized to add that if your Excellencies' comfort can in any way be served, or your return to Kabul expedited, our resources are at your service."

Bombshells might have fallen and produced less consternation, less excitement, less explosions of the nine-and-ninety names of Allah. Dignity came to the aid of the emir's men; they bowed and followed Jonesey to the door. Then Rahman:

"Son of the storms," he exploded, "know you what this means? Know you what Kabul will answer to that speech?"

"No," said Gup. "I am no reader of an emir's mind. But is the army ready?"

"By my beard, yes, ready!" Rahman answered. "And the word is—?"

"Silence!" said Gup. "Silence until we learn the emir's answer."

* * *

The mystery of inspiration needs
No new materials, no elements of chance.
The selfsame actors to another tune it leads,
Transmuting dead tread to a buoyant dance
Like nature's. Then the ifs and the perhaps
Change sides; sly treachery and dark deceit
Turn swiftly on each other and are traps
That take their own inventors by the feet.

CHAPTER XIX

"BUT WAIT AND SEE WHAT HAPPENS WHEN WE GET THE WIND UP!"

RAHMAN chose Gup's bodyguard and that night Gup slept, on a cot in a bare walled cavern, four hours, with a sentry at the door. Jonesey slept within hail. Rahman snored in a nearby cave until the tunnel rumbled like a subway. Pepul Das slept like a cat on a mat at the foot of Rahman's bed. Until Gup got up and strode away to breakfast in a cavern where through the window he could see the first pale light limning the savage outlines of the crags around the valley's rim, the tunnel was patrolled by the six-foot Pathans of Rahman's selection.

There is nothing on all God's earth more personal than a hand picked guard of Hillmen sworn to stand between their leader and all violence, of whatever enemy, and be it as subtle as slow poison or as menacingly terrible as blazing flame.

He found he might no longer eat until a courteous, hook nosed giant with a black beard had dared death, sipping the coffee and nibbling fragrant food before he touched it. Even his cigarets were handed to him by a man who picked the first one from the box at random and, not having any use for such effeminate things, chewed it in his presence.

His personal cook and the six-foot stalwart, looking like an ogre from a fairy tale, whose duty was to clean the pots and pans, were ushered in and stood before him. By their fathers' beards and in the nine-and-ninety names of Allah, they swore it should be on their heads if their master suffered so much as a twinging bellyache.

A doctor came in—challenged in the tunnel with a noise like fire irons falling, and saluted with the silent scorn of men who intended to give him lots of blood and mangled bodies to engage his curious zeal. He was a Sikh with diplomas from two European schools of medicine, a frequent correspondent in the columns of *The Lancet* and accused, by some, of being an authority on Freudian phenomena; by others frowned at as a fogey of the mediæval school, half of whose stock in trade was superstition.

"Yes," he said, "Harriet Dover is ill and I am not sure she was ever well. Nervous breakdown is a blanket phrase that may mean genius up a wrong tree. If you wished for a more illuminating label, I would mention hell's bells; it says less and it probably means more. I could draw you a curve of her physical resistance, showing how she simply had to crack. I have always considered her crazy. I am interested in crazy people. I joined this enterprise because nothing else could make me famous in such a short time. If you win—which you won't—I shall have anything I ask for in the line of hospitals and clinics. If you lose—which you will—they will shoot you or hang you. They will have to knight me! I shall be like the Spanish doctor, whom the all conquering Americans had to leave in charge of the Philippine hospitals. Nobody could take his place. Nobody can take mine.

"I shall, of course, employ a press agent; only he will be called a secretary. I shall revel in the well earned and adroitly exploited reputation of being a brilliant organizer, whose ministrations to the wounded of both sides prevented lots of agony and possibly an epidemic. No, I don't practise surgery—much. I leave that to the labor gang—I mean my specialists. Surgeons haven't any brains; they are mechanics. Come and see my plant."

He showed Gup through a hospital that, on the face of it, at least, would have done credit to the most efficient army in the world. There appeared to be nothing lacking. There were field supplies all ready to be rushed into action. There was a Russian who had licked a hundred Hillmen into shape as orderlies, and each man seemed to know what would be required of him when the murdering game began. There was a corps of stretcher bearers. There were medical supplies in quantities beyond belief.

The nurses were nearly all Anglo-Eurasians and Goanese, who had had experience in British-Indian hospitals, but there were some white women, several of whom were widows of British soldiers. Most of the surgeons and assistant surgeons were Bengalis, but there was a Japanese in charge of them who had won his laurels, as a young man, in the war with Russia—and had lost them afterward for selling opium to Chinese through the parcel post.

The ventilation of the tunnels was a miracle of ingenuity, contrived by making use of the natural flow of warm air upward; it was sucked up by the heat—a quarter of a mile away—of oil that had been burning in the bowels of the mountain, no man knew how many years. There was no pressure such as results from forced draught, but a constant, hardly noticeable flow of fresh, cool air through every passage and into every corner.

Doctor Dost Singh did his best to camouflage his pride under a mask of cynicism, but he did not deceive even himself.

"Magnificent out of the dust it came," he quoted. "We made it out of nothing but a lot of caverns filthy from bats and owls. It's pretty, isn't it? But, oh, when the slaughter begins! I'd rather be a pig at the gate of a sausage factory; less fuss, sooner over with! It's all on paper like a German army time-sheet, but wait and see what happens when we get the wind up!"

"Could you evacuate?" Gup asked him. "I mean, supposing a plane dropped poison gas where it might flow in through the ventilating system, how soon could you empty the place?"

The question sounded almost casual, as if Gup were only asking for the sake of showing an encouraging interest.

"Oh, I've thought that out. That comes under the head of fire drill. Fifteen minutes for the patients. Longer, of course, for the stores—perhaps much longer, depending on how many men could be spared from some other department. Might have to abandon a part of the stores."

"What would you do with the wounded?"

"There's a ledge, two thousand feet above us, protected by an overleaning bulge of the cliff—total area an acre and a half—and from there on up there is a practical pathway leading to the summit. But gas is the last risk we have to consider. No enemy we have to reckon with would use it. Some of our idiots have been making gas from cyanide—suicide gas, I call it—deadly stuff—too deadly—kill us, too! I'd almost bet you that it creeps against the wind! And who knows what tricks a wind will play among these gorges?"

Gup made mental note of all that; but to Doctor Dost Singh he appeared to be skimming the surface of things and in rather a hurry to get to something more important. He betrayed small interest in the radio plant that Jonesey showed him presently, his apparently casual questions leading nowhere in particular that Jonesey could detect. And Jonesey was as keen to detect Gup's ultimate purpose as a mediæval monk inquiring into the secret heresies of some one's soul; but all that Jonesey accomplished was to keep Gup thoroughly on guard against his curiosity.

THEN Rahman displayed the fruits of genius. He claimed credit for the skeleton battalions that lay, hair-trigger ready, in the subterranean barracks. Numbers of the men wore medal ribbons; most of them had served at least one period of enlistment in the British-Indian or Afghan army; scores of them had "dug in" in the Flanders mud, and hundreds had sickened and sweltered amid flies in Mesopotamia.

There were Afghans who had fought alongside Arabs in the Allenby drive against the Turks in Palestine, and Pathans who had fought with the Turks, Afridis who had lain in London drawing rooms converted into hospitals and convalescent wards, men who had toiled in the grime of deep sea bunkers, men who had been submarined, men who were wanted for murder in Indian cities, men who limped from having served a prison sentence in the heavy fetters that they rivet to the legs of felons reckoned likely to escape.

There were men who had traded horses all the way from Nijninovgorod to Bombay; men who had looted caravans from Trebizond to Peking. And there were plain men, simply waiting for an opportunity to prove themselves as hardboiled as the others. Each man was a nucleus, around whom others could gather when summoned by messenger or signal from near or far villages.

And to all these men the ranee was the invisible core of the mystery. Even the majority of the senior officers had hardly more than glimpsed her, and then veiled. They had heard her royal voice, perhaps at night, addressing them in terms of faith in an ideal and of vision of unfolding destiny; but each man's own imagination had been left to fill in details and even to suggest what the ultimate aim might be. *Izzat* was the one word handed down and tossed from lip to lip; it signifies the personal integrity and honor of the man who uses it. Each interpreted the word as freely as he chose, except that all knew it implied obedience to orders.

Punishments were drastic. There were cells at the ends of tunnels in the mountain, where no light ever entered, and no sound excepting once a day the footsteps of a guard who brought bread and water. There was a pinnacle of rock where a man could be strapped up naked in the sun by day and in the bitter night air, to reflect on the folly of protest against wheels of will when they are once set moving. And there was the grim "Tarpean" crag, so many thousand feet in air that it was painful to gaze at it against the sun; the crag on which the blindfold "accidents" were staged because the ranee had forbidden murder.

At the crag's foot, inaccessible and deep, there was a chasm into which no man had ever looked, unless from the summit; so that no man ever knew what happened to the bodies of men who fell into that dreadful place and there were shuddering hints about the gates of hell. The hints were no less serious because the foot of the cliff shone greenish yellow in the sun and the fumes of sulfur now and then came stenching forth from only Allah knew what awful throat.

"They'll cut loose if they don't get work to do! They'll either join the emir and make him invincible, or they'll plunder India on their own account. Or they'll obey me. Can I hold 'em?"

Gup had led men into hell and out again, in Flanders mud, by being big and letting all men see him dignified and unafraid. He had the trick of making himself a center of attention, and he knew he had it. He knew that from now on, until the end of this adventure, he must play act; he must strut his part in buskins on a stage where the applause would be men's obedience. He had nothing, literally no resources but his own height, dignity and mother wit. He used them.

Obviously, since the ranee cultivated mystery and unseen purposes behind impenetrable veils, his cue must be to do the opposite. That much was as logical and simple as arithmetic. He must show himself, and make men feel the thrill that follows confident commands delivered in a voice as vibrant as dynamic will can make it. They must think of him as the man on horseback; as the symbol, almost, of a dim ideal flashing into concrete form; as visible, audible, calm, unhesitating, proud authority. And he could do that. He could do it without effort. He could do it so easily that often his own countrymen had thought him arrogant and vain when, if the truth were known, he had been miserable with a sense of his own unimportance, feeling like an insect on the face of blind infinity.

Because of his appearance he had been an irritant and an offense to brass hats and a target for the gibes of self-assertive weaklings; but a tower of strength to men in doubt and men in trouble. He understood that perfectly. God had given him guts and good looks; he saw no shame in using them, although he would have preferred the wilderness that Omar Khayyam praised, with Lottie singing to him and a book to read.

So he strutted his part; and he took the big black stallion that had been brought up-valley from the hut where Rahman left him—ramping full he was of corn and the whinny of stabled mares; and he rode like a grim Mogul to the long parade ground where he watched the skeleton battalions put through their drill. They made him choke. The steady tramp of them was like the rhythm of eternal forces moving in the arteries of time, and he knew the emotion, and the craving for more emotion, that has sent the Caesars and Iskanders sailing on a restless tide, believing that they made it.

There was nothing rigid, nothing brittle or numb about those veterans. They swung with an elastic step. The motion of the line responding to Gup's trumpet throated thunder of command was as exciting as the burst of surf on rock staked beaches. There was unity of will, not gummed up by the goose-step glue that conscripts are supposed to need to keep them from milling in mobs. Their movement was as laborless and curving as the play flight of carrier pigeons—not a straight line in a thousand of them, and no hesitancy, nor a foot set wrong—until they halted at last with a thunder of grounded rifle butts, and dressed, and stood like statues. Not a sound then, not a ripple in the ranks. But every pair of eyes looked straight at Gup and seemed to ask him "Whither?" and to urge him with the silent pleading of a hunting dog:

"Lead on, Bahadur! North, south, east or west is all one to the *lashkar!* Lead us!"

GUP AVOIDED the ranee all that day. He dreaded the thought of answering the ranee's questions. Was it impossible to save her from disaster and prevent a war without playing the part of a hypocrite? God, how he hated it!

That drove him. He mastered and memorized details, gathering in mind the total sum of his resources. No planes, no artillery. Even the emir probably had half a dozen planes; he certainly had field guns. The British-Indian army would have planes, artillery, tanks and, it might be, poison gas, although he doubted that. He must avoid, at all costs and by any means, a sudden onslaught by the British army, which might elect to try to smash this outlaw army first, before the emir could get into action. That would certainly start the emir moving, and then who could stop the ranee's troops from throwing in their lot with the man from the north?

He had no means of knowing that the emir's spies were stirring such unrest in India that the Indian army had had to be kept at strategic points to prevent rebellion. Nor did he guess how much reliance would be placed on Tom O'Hara's curt report, sent down the valley to Peshawar. He did not even know that Tom O'Hara had escaped from the caverns.

One other point that puzzled him was how to account for the insolent over-confidence of the emir's message to the ranee. It was as clear as daylight that Harriet Dover had thought of poisoning the emir's wife, whether or not she had made the attempt. Gup guessed she had probably made the attempt and had been detected. Certainly she had sought to make herself a power in Asia by offering to betray the ranee into the emir's hands, either as wife or prisoner. But how had she proposed to do that? The Russians? Rahman had said there was one Russian who commanded a thousand men. He thought of sending for all the Russians and examining them, but that seemed only likely to put them on their guard; so instead he sent again for Rahman, who was inspecting stables. He had to trust somebody.

"Rahman," he said, "we agreed that you and I are friends. I intend to trust you to the hilt."

"Speak on, *huzur*."

"This business is rotten. It can lead to nothing except ruin for the ranee and every one of us, unless we act like men, not maniacs. You're an Afghan. But do you wish to see your ranee in an Afghan harem?"

"No, by God."

"Do you wish to be the emir's servant?"

"I would die first."

"Will you agree with me, then, that the thing to do is to save the ranee from disaster and, by doing the Indian government a good turn, to get amnesty for all of us, including her and you and me?"

"But she will not be saved! I know her!" Rahman answered. "She is a proud woman. She is not of the sort that fear death."

"That emir," said Gup, "has a card up his sleeve."

"There is this that I know concerning him," said Rahman. "He sits on a shaking throne and seeks a war to occupy his restless men and bring him wealth and prestige. He would dearly love to control this army of ours. And by my beard, if he could get our ranee into his hands he might be able to control it. My thought is that Bibi Harriet Dover has made him some such offer and that she has her plans all laid."

"Yes, but why should she do that?"

"Allah, that is easy to imagine! Our ranee has compunctions—Bibi Harriet has none whatever! In the beginning, when wrath sat on the ranee's brow and there was nothing to do but talk and make ready—organize—plan—smuggle—intrigue, it was easy to make the ranee talk even of conquering India. Bloodshed, Gup Bahadur, looks less crimson on a map of Asia than on a square mile when the guns begin. So the closer we came to actualities the harder it was to persuade our ranee to make one move that should bring on warfare; and that is a mood that stirs contempt in such as Bibi Harriet, who craves excitement. Allah! That woman would rather be torn on a torture rack than suffer mediocrity! Her mild eyes are the mask of murder. Her slow smile is a silken sheath concealing treachery. These things I knew, but what could I do? Remonstrate? I was accused of jealousy! Lo, I hunted and trapped me a man who might solve the riddle — and here you stand, Gup Bahadur."

"That doesn't explain the emir's insolence. He is an Afghan. So are you. Explain it for me."

"Not so difficult. He is a vain man who thinks himself clever. He has heard of Moustapha Kemal and Mussolini, of Lenin and Trotzky, and he remembers the fame of Abdurrahman. He will emulate all those and surpass them in cunning! So, let us say that the Bibi Harriet convinces him, through secret agents, that she has a plan by which she can betray our ranee to him—what then? How shall he be cunning? Shall he be beholden to the Bibi Harriet if he can help that?

Not he! Remember, he is vain and inexperienced; he thinks the glamor of an emir's name is likelier than not to terrify and turn a woman's head. And he knows that the ranee no longer dares to retreat to India. So he sends that message, hoping she will realize he never would have sent it unless he knew he could take by force what he demands with insolence."

"Did you get spies to watch the emir's men?"

"Surely. They were heard to say nothing of any import. But they set forth homeward laughing."

"Is Harriet Dover at liberty?"

"No, I have seen to that. She keeps her room with only the Bibi Marwarid. They two are one twin devil. Guards are in the corridor."

"Whom does she trust?"

"Jonesey and my man, Pepul Das."

"And do you trust either of them?"

"Pepul Das."

"Does she know that you trust Pepul Das?"

"Surely. But she does not know that Pepul Das would rather die than play me false. It is from Pepul Das that I have learned most of what I know about the Bibi Harriet."

"If Pepul Das should go to her and pretend to be indignant with you and me, would she believe him?"

"*Insh'allah*, probably. And why not? In extremity people lean on any prop that offers."

"And Jonesey?"

"As I told you already, Bahadur, that man Jonesey is a mischief, whom nothing but mischief interests. He is no seeker of rewards. He craves no power. If a thing amuses him, he does it. It is all one to him where the sun shines, so be he sits in it. It is all one to him who laughs or suffers, so be Jonesey is amused."

"And Harriet Dover trusts him?"

"Allah! Why not? Are they not two kidneys of one devil? Gup Bahadur, if it had not been for those two, none of this could have happened. Now that it has happened, if it were not for those two it might succeed! Thus wonderful are God's ways. There is no explaining them!"

"Are Jonesey and the Russians friendly?"

"He is friendly with every one."

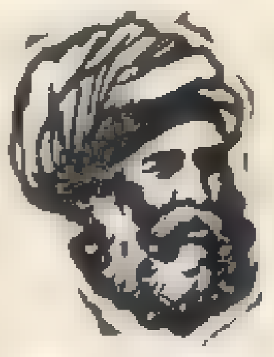
"Particularly with the Russians?"

"Yes."

"And one of them commands a thousand men? Might not Jonesey have tempted the Russians? Might not six Russians and a thousand men seize the ranee and surrender her to the emir?"

"It might be," said Rahman, slowly, grudgingly.

"The emir undoubtedly has spies in this place?"



RAHMAN admitted that more readily.

"Spies are like the pox, Bahadur. They break out at all times in all sorts of places. There are good preventives and good remedies, but there is never absolute immunity from spies or sickness."

"So the emir may be well informed of what goes on here?"

"*Insh'allah*. Why not?"

"Rahman, if you were the emir, what would you do?"

"Bahadur, I would have raped this nest so suddenly that there would be no time to summon the troops from their villages. I would have blocked the entrances as boys block up a rat hole. But for that he is already too late. The troops are already summoned to the swearing in of Gup Bahadur."

"What do you believe the ranee means to do?" Gup asked him.

"She is a proud woman. She will not abandon her hope of a kingdom. And she is a loyal woman. She will not desert her friends, even though they betray her. Gup Bahadur, saving only Allah and a good horse, there is no such fountain of forgiveness as an honest woman. If the Bibi Harriet pleads sickness and pretends shame and contrition, our ranee will forgive her. And then may you and I beware of vengeance!"

"But the ranee, you think, will—"

"Allah! Think? I know, Bahadur! She will talk of attacking the emir, but she will never fire the first shot. She will keep us bottled up in this place, doing nothing, until the emir comes and corks us in. Harriet Dover will keep on preaching we have no artillery and after we are corked in, leaving the emir free to plunder India, Harriet Dover doubtless will seek to escape and become the emir's evil genius. Umm Kulsum is her true name! Yet if you and I should slay the Bibi Harriet, our ranee would turn her back on us—because she loves her friends and is loyal to them even though they betray her. She would not command us to be slain, since are we not also her friends? But neither would she forgive us, because thou and I are not liars who would pretend to repent for a deed we had done in good faith. So we gain nothing if we slay the Bibi Harriet. How shall we save our ranee? Gup Bahadur, I believe the answer is, we die with her! A man dies once. What of it?"

"Will you back me if I take the law into my hands," said Gup, "and force her to save herself and India and all of us? Will you trust me to try?"

"By my father's beard, I chose you, praying to Allah three times daily lest I make a wrong choice. Shall I then not trust you? Speak your will, Bahadur. I obey."

"All right, Rahman. We agree to trust each other. Do your orders go with the guards at the cavern entrance? And with the ranee's guards? Very well—make sure then I can leave the caverns tonight without question. Don't say a word to Jonesey; I will take him with me. How many personal guards have I? Twelve. Pick me twelve more and swear them in; tell them to report to me. I want one Russian; the one will do who made the poison gas. Arrest all the other Russians suddenly and silently. Lock them up where nobody can get to them. Turn the poison maker over to my guards and tell them to keep him out of sight until we march tonight. I'll need that black stallion, pack mules, three or four days' provisions, two extra tents and blankets—and of course I'll take my cook and kettle boy. Then take care that when I go to Miss Dover's apartment after dark tonight the ranee's guard will let me pass. Will you attend to all that?"

"*Insh'allah.* And its meaning?"

"I was hunted and caught, to command this army, Rahman. I am going to do my job, that's all. I'm going to depend on your promise to trust me. And I will tell you my plan in detail first—before I trust any one else with it, but not yet."

"It would seem, Bahadur, that you make a poor start at trusting me."

"Not at all. I make a good beginning. If you knew my plan you would be trying to fill in details. Your own genius would be hampered. I would rather leave you free to act on your own judgment in an emergency. Now, when is the swearing in?"

"Tomorrow midnight—full moon in the Valley of Doab."

"Be there and bring all the men, except of course the few details needed to guard the caverns. Count on me to be there, too, no matter what you may hear in the meanwhile."

"Very well, Bahadur."

"Send Pepul Das to Miss Harriet Dover. Let him say he hates me—let him say, if he likes, that I kicked him. If she gives him a message for Jonesey or the Russians, let him report to you, and you report to me. Whatever you do, let Jonesey think I trust him. And send Jonesey to me in my room before dinner. Meanwhile, Rahman, I am proud to share this difficulty with you. Shake hands."

* * *

Who breaks no vows makes martyr of
himself
More stupid than the heathen in his hut
Who worships little godlets on a shelf,
Their idiot maws open and their blind
eyes shut.
The inward essence of the spoken vow
denies
That Growth is Law and there is seed
beneath all sod.
Today's accepted slogans are tomorrow's
lies.
The maker of inviolate vows is God.

CHAPTER XX

"GUP—WHAT DO YOU MEAN?"

THERE was almost no twilight. Darkness, in that deep ravine, came suddenly. The sun vanished beyond the ragged rim and, almost at once, pale stars appeared in a sky that was still day blue. Fire after fire was lighted in cavern mouths, accentuating gloom; there were fires three thousand feet above where Gup left Rahman standing. A thunder of drumbeats—substitute for bugles—announced roll call before supper, and a sudden blaze of light showed in the ranee's windows.

He strode to his quarters, two of his bodyguard tramping along behind him. They were marvelously personal. Between splutterings, as they sluiced him down and scrubbed him with hot and then cold water in his private cavern, he gave them precisely worded orders, noticing their enjoyment of the imposed secrecy—no oath, just orders to tell no one. That, too, was personal. Not trust, but suggested mistrust, is what corrupts fidelity; if you know how to trust a Hillman you may safely do it.

He was shaved, dressed and smoking, sprawling on a cot and waiting for the ranee's dinner hour, when Rahman came in haste.

"Pepul Das has been to her. She is like a leopard in a cage, first lying down, then standing, then sitting, then pacing the floor. And she believed his story, or so it seems, for she told him to say to Jonesey that he knows what to do, and that the Russians know also."

"All right, Rahman. Where's Jonesey?"

"He is on his way here."

Rahman went and Jonesey came, as usual leaning on his long staff and looking rather comically pious.

"Jonesey, I want you to take charge of my belongings and show me a place to camp where I can get some solitude. I will tell you why later. Be ready to start after dinner, and meanwhile kindly hold your tongue. Two of my guards will wait with you—they know where."

He gave Jonesey no time to ask questions, but went then, in raiment such as a ranee's general ought to wear on state occasions, but in the throne room the ranee kept him waiting for several minutes. The commander of her bodyguard, the treasurer, the doctor and a dozen other executives gathered around him, all of them excited because they had seen him reviewing the troops and knew he had been assuring himself that all was ready for an instant move; but he managed to parry their questions until most of the ranee's ladies entered. He was afraid then that there was going to be a banquet, which would have ruined his plan; but simultaneously there came a summons for himself to the silver peacock room, and to all the others to a dinner elsewhere, "where her Highness will join you afterward." The servants vanished. Gup admitted himself into the ranee's presence.

"Well," she asked, "what do you think of my men?"

She had been crying—he supposed about Harriet Dover. Nevertheless, the merry Lottie Carstairs smile, that once won London, shone forth bravely to mock his solemnity. Gup could not help being solemn when sincerity obliged him to do something he disliked. It is really a sub-subtle sense of humor that makes a Scotsman turn his coat, as it were, inside outward; he is ridiculing his own embarrassment but it passes for lack of humor, which is not the same thing. The Scots lack nothing except immodesty to make them the greatest nation in the world. Lottie Carstairs had the genius to see through that enigma.

"You are wondering what to say to me about Harriet?" she asked. "Don't trouble. I have said it all myself. And now that's over with. When she apologizes I will take her in my arms, and you will see, she won't try to betray me again." She smiled. "How stern you look. Did you come here to preach?"

"No," he said, "I promise I won't preach. I'm going to eat your dinner, pledge you in your own wine, and then declare war."

"On whom? For God's sake—not on the emir? Gup, you will use up all our strength and leave us at the Indian army's mercy! You mustn't take too seriously that message he sent. If there must be war, let the emir declare it."

"War on you!" Gup interrupted. "Let's eat and drink. It may be our last meal together." He managed to force himself to smile.

She laughed. She believed he was joking.

"Very well," she said. "Fight while we eat. What's the trouble?"

"No," he answered. "I will eat with you as evidence of good will. After that I go—away from here. I intend to steal your army. With the army I intend to clean up this mess. Then I'm going to carry you off and marry you."

She suddenly looked almost deathly tired and it dawned on Gup that not only he had been busy all day long. Thinking is harder work than doing. But she still believed he was joking, although the joke seemed heavy as her slow smile and her raised brows indicated. The deaf and dumb maid began to wait on them.

"What do you mean, Gup?" The smile died and her face grew serious.

"Please smile," he answered. "I like it. I may never see you smile again. I am delivering a genuine ultimatum."

"Gup—what do you mean?"

"Exactly what I have told you." He signed to the maid to fill one glass with champagne. "Drink, Lottie. Then pass the glass to me."

She obeyed him, sipped the wine. He drank the rest of it in one gulp.

"Gup, I don't understand you."

"It's very simple," he said. "I have known for two days that I love you."

She was silent, staring at him.

"And Lottie, it is not given to a man like me to do things halfway. When I say I love you I mean that without reservation. I love only you, and I propose to make you love me."

"Make me?" she asked.

"Make you," he said simply. "But I propose to play fair, fair to myself, for instance. It is easy to be fair to you, in fact more than generous. It suddenly dawned on me an hour ago that I have almost never been fair to myself. I propose to begin. Do eat. I am sure you need your dinner."

HE SET her the example. He was feeling fine now. He knew exactly what he was going to say and do; he found it easier than he expected; he was actually smiling. And she sat wondering at him with blue eyes from which bathing had hardly washed away the tears, saying nothing, but with that mystic look of ancient Egypt on her face that made him think of Hatshepsut who sat on the throne of Horus. She made a lame attempt at eating.

"Lottie. I suppose you admit that you trapped me, at the cost of my good name and lawful standing in the Anglo-Indian community?"

"Yes, I admit that."

"That was an act of banditry. I have a right to reprisal. I take it—in the form of my personal guards, four and twenty mules, my horse, these clothes I stand in, and three days' rations."

"Are you mad? You can have anything you want here."

"I want you," said Gup, "but on my own terms. And I am going to have you. I declare war!"

"Aren't you talking a little wildly, Gup? Doesn't it occur to you how easily I could—? I have only to summon my guards, you know."

"I am risking that. I am presuming that you know how to play fair as well as I do. I intend to fight you for your army, tomorrow, at midnight."

"Why?" she asked him. She appeared completely bewildered by his change of manner. "Do you imagine my army is not loyal to me?"

"Possibly it is. But I am also loyal to you. I came on this scene almost too late, and I have wasted valuable time pondering a problem that a wise man could have answered in less than ten minutes. You don't love me yet, do you?"

"I don't know what to think of you. You make me breathless."

"Well," said Gup, "that's a very moderate reprisal, Lottie, for some very painful hours that you have given me! However, never mind; that's over with. From now on, you and I begin to understand each other, and you will understand me more easily if you remember that I love you with all my heart. Don't have any doubt about that, because it's true. I only wish I had had sense enough to love you in London in the old days."

She smiled.

"Gup, do you remember that line of Gilbert's, 'It was all very well to dissemble your love, but why did you kick me downstairs?' You speak in one and the same breath of loving and fighting. Won't you explain?"

"Simple. You needn't fight unless you want to. You may surrender at any time. But, you see, it was you who began the war by making me an outlaw at the end of the first skirmish. I'm going to use your army to regain my standing in a civilized community, and incidentally yours also. If you have moral, or any other kind of right to capture me by force or trickery, I have an equal right to capture you. You propose that I should go your way. I intend that you shall come my way. There is the issue."

"Gup, do you propose to turn on me in a crisis—at a moment when I am shocked by what Harriet Dover did, and when the emir may come down on us at any minute?"

"That's exactly why I do it," Gup retorted. "Tell me what you would do if the emir comes?"

"I would stay here. We could hold this place forever against him."

"As long as food lasts! And meanwhile he corks you in with the aid of a handful of troops and is free to march on India with nine-tenths of his army! You see, Lottie, you're a wonderful organizer and dreamer, but you know nothing about strategy and nothing about war. Do you know what I intend to do?"

"You mean if I should let you?"

"What I will do is this: use this place as a bait for the emir. If he is fool enough to take it and bottle up his army in it, all the better! However, I rather expect to catch him on his way here. Win, lose or draw, he will know he has been in a fight. I can promise him that."

"There may be no need to fight," she answered. "An army is a very powerful diplomatic argument. Let him invade India. He will probably agree to yield me all this country in return for neutrality. And he will also almost certainly be defeated."

Gup laughed.

"Lottie, neither you nor I could hold this army neutral for two days! You have raised it, paid it, trained it, fed it with enthusiasm and pride in itself; now it has got to fight somebody, no matter whom. Furthermore, the emir's promises are worth exactly what force can make him fulfill—not a scrap more. In addition to which you would have India to deal with afterward. However, none of that is important compared to two main points, of which the first is that I won't see India invaded if my life can prevent it; and the other is that I love you far too much to let you make such an awful mistake. But arguments won't persuade you. I know that. I will have to prove it to you."

"I wish you would kindly not talk in riddles. What do you mean by prove it to me? And what do you mean about fighting me for my army?"

"Tomorrow at midnight I am to be sworn in, am I not? Very well, let us both be there. I will come with four-and-twenty men. You bring as many as you wish—bring all of them. If I win the army, it's mine. If you win it, it's yours."

Her eyes brightened.

"And if I win, do you yield to me?"

"Never!" he answered. "If you win, you do as you please, or what you can with your army. I go—or the army shoots me—it doesn't matter. But if I win, the army will do as I tell it."

"And then?"

"I will repeat to you what I say now—that I love you."

"And you will expect me to yield to you? But you won't yield to me if I win? Gup, do you call that a fair proposal?"

"Certainly. Because I will lead you on an honorable course, whereas you would want to lead me on a dishonorable one."

"Oh, you Scotsman! You masculine, opinionated, obstinate egotist!"

"Guilty," said Gup. "But I love you." He rose to his feet.

"One more glass of wine, Lottie, just one glass between us, and then I'm off."

The deaf and dumb maid filled a glass. She tested it; Gup drank the rest.

"So long then, Lottie. Next time we meet we join battle. Meanwhile, I pay you the compliment of perfect confidence that you won't try to stop me from leaving the caverns."

He was aching to take her in his arms, but he was the same Gup McLeod he had always been—as diffident toward a woman as if she were a mystical religion. He could smash her expensive impersonal plans and ruin all that she had built of material goods, but her personal self-respect was sacred. It was not that he was afraid of her, nor did he doubt that she liked him; he even half suspected that she already loved him. But that was all the more reason for waiting until he was sure of it.

Meanwhile, she was magnificent. No scorn, no bitter words, no threat, no scene. She stood wondering, watching him go.

OUTSIDE, in the tunnel beyond the anteroom was the Russian, buried in a sheepskin overcoat between two of Gup's bodyguard. Jonesey was leaning on his long staff, looking more than ever like a stained glass window saint. Two more Pathans stood near him, but Jonesey appeared unconscious of being watched.

"Lead on—to Miss Harriet Dover's quarters."

Even Jonesey showed surprise at that, but he said nothing—led the way up winding passages and a stairway hewn in limestone, to a corridor where bearded Hillmen leaned on rifles. They stared, but saluted and made no effort to prevent Gup's passing. Was he not the new commander of the ranee's army? Had not Rahman given orders?

Jonesey struck the teak door with his long staff. It was opened by Bibi Marwarid, scandalized.

"Such noise? She is asleep!"

Gup strode in, she backing away before him. There were two rooms, with a door between. He signed to Bibi Marwarid to lead the way into the inner room. She hesitated, but obeyed when she saw he would otherwise go in alone. Not a word was spoken until Gup stood one long pace within the inner room, with Jonesey at his elbow. It was a rather plain room, although the rock walls were hidden by Indian hangings and there was a dressing table with a long mirror and silver fittings.

Harriet Dover sat in an armchair, where she seemed to have been dozing. She glared at Gup as if eyes could kill him, but her eyes met relentless destiny and she recognized it.

"You two ladies are to come with me at once. Wrap up warmly. Throw what you need into a bag. My guards will carry it."

Harriet Dover rose slowly out of the chair.

"What does this mean?" she demanded.

"You are under arrest," Gup answered. Not wanting a scene, then, in that place, he added, "No immediate harm will happen to you."

"I am ill," she exclaimed.

"You may be carried if you wish."

"By whose orders?"

"Mine."

"Leave me," she commanded, "while I get dressed."

But he did not doubt she had a pistol somewhere in the room and he did not propose to be shot in the back. He strode to the bed and seized the quilt and blankets.

"Are you coming?" he asked. "Or shall I—"

She accepted that hint, nodding to Marwarid who began tossing toilet things into a bag.

"Haven't you the decency to tell me where I am going or how long I'm to be gone?" Harriet Dover demanded. "How do I know what things I need?"

"It doesn't much matter," said Gup. "You will need no ball dress."

"No use telling a cad he is one. I am ready."

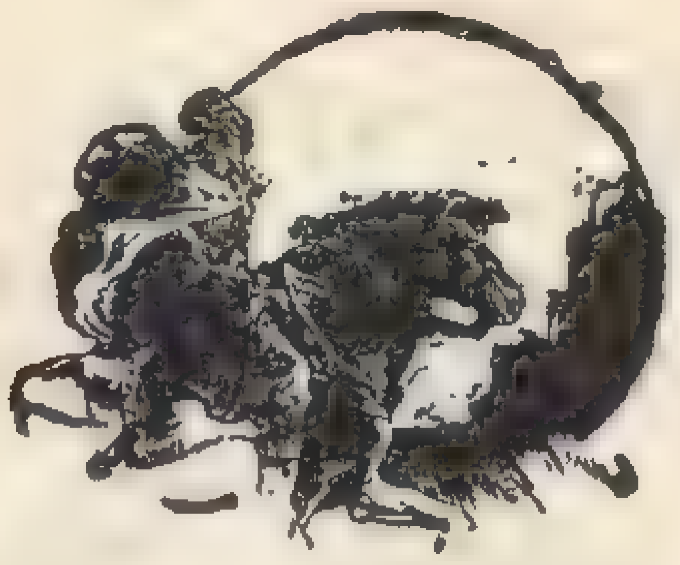
She pulled on a cloak with a hood like a monk's and tossed another to Marwarid. Jonesey took the bag. Gup signed to the women to walk in front of him.

"You will both be gagged if you make any outcry," he remarked.

Two guards marched in front. Two more followed with the Russian between them. Then the women, Gup and Jonesey, two more guards. Silence, and only the tramp of footsteps echoing down long tunnels—almost endless tunnels, that rose and descended and twisted and turned, until electric light ceased; but the guards had electric torches. At last they reached a cavern hung with stalactites, in which the rest of Gup's guard and the stallion and mules were waiting. Gup chose two mules that were lightly loaded and ordered the women lifted on to them.

"Lead on," he commanded.

And now Jonesey led, along echoing, winding passages from cavern to cavern, until at last they came to a ramp that had been a waterfall, where four men had to hold the stallion, leaning against him, and the mules slid down with all four feet together. There were guards at the top of that ramp, who challenged, but accepted Jonesey's password, and then vanished into a cave where a fire was burning. And at the bottom of the ramp they found themselves under the stars in a narrow gully between cliffs so high that the stars seemed to be set in purple glass that rested on their ragged summit.



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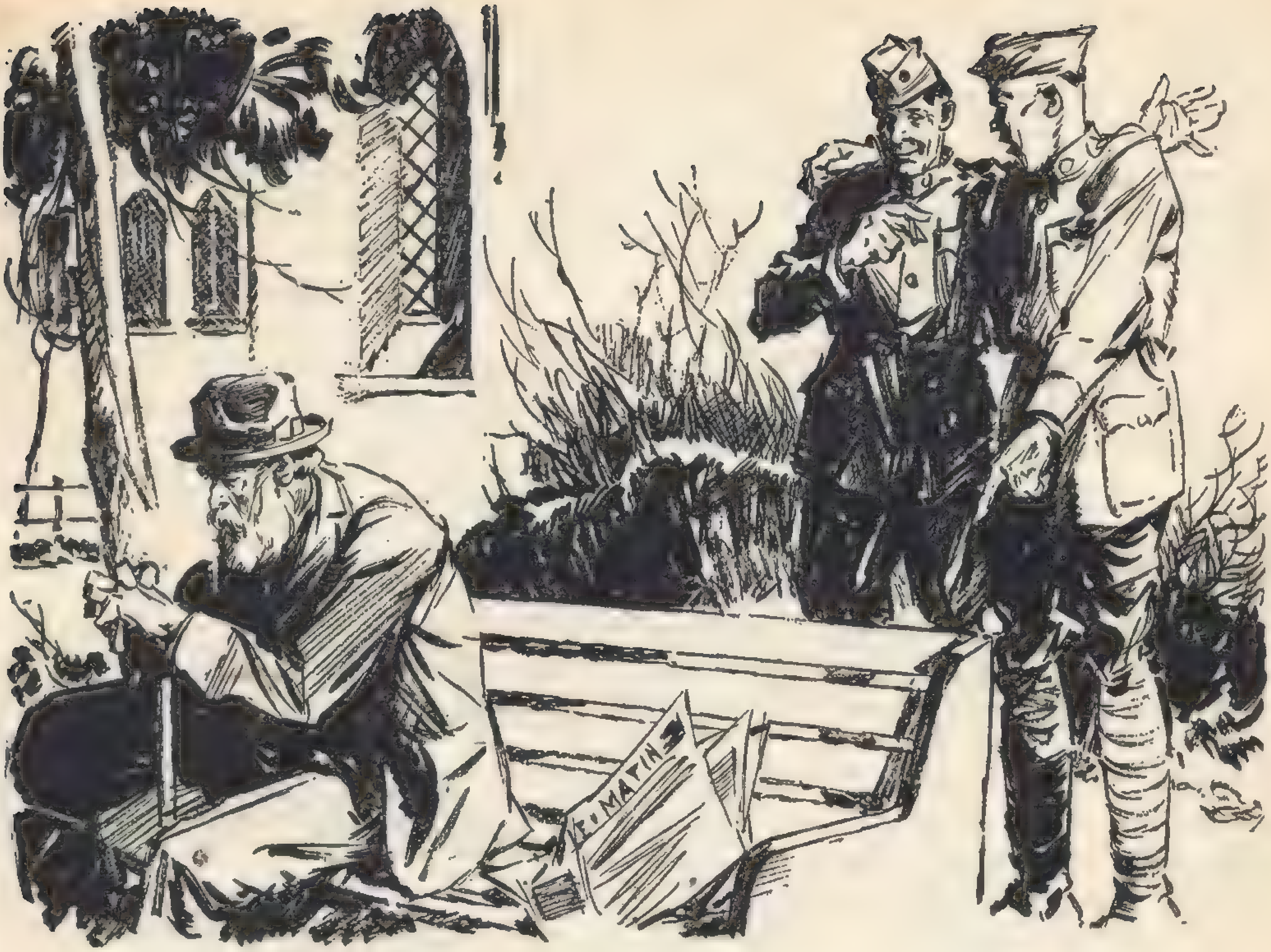


An Old Man WAS TO BLAME

A Story of Bordeaux in the Merry Days after the War

By ANDREW A. CAFFREY

WHILE the big doings were on we never dreamed that a day would come when France would forget—forget all the swell laughs we gave her. No! Of course, all that "Lafayette, we are here" stuff couldn't last, because, when it was pulled, all the French had to go back to school and find out just who Lafayette was. But the money we spent! And the suds that we bought! And the fun that was had by all! How can they forget? Ah, it's a bet that Bordeaux has not forgotten.

Bordeaux was different. Bordeaux and its wine; its red, red wine. They are different. They're strong and potent and lasting. And what happens there, under that wine, does not happen at all; and what does not happen, under that red wine, does happen. But, you say, that sounds crazy. Crazy is right!

That summer day in Bordeaux, Private Crinnion had been lapping up everything that looked wet. Just to see that Crinnion didn't get gypped I went along and tried the goods first—you've got to be careful and look out for doped stuff. I didn't want Crin to get doped. Yet, in spite of my watchfulness, we must have tied into something that had more than the usual recoil, something that reared up and pawed out for you, something that made either a hell hooting Yank of you or else humbled you to the quiet of a gentle lamb. It lambed us to death. Slowly, in a world gone wrong, we crawled out into Bordeaux and her bright sunshine and began to cast about for a place to die.

"Man!" Crinnion exclaimed in awed wonder. "That stuff would sure make a wildcat wild. If you swabbed a gun with a bar rag out of that joint, the gun would backfire through pre-ignition.

"I got to find me a place to take a flop," he said, and we meandered toward the Cathedral of St. Andrew's. "Boy, I'm done!"

A few minutes later Private Crinnion's covetous gaze stopped where an old man sat dreaming on the granite bench in the quiet shade of St. Andrew's.

"I sure wish that that old frog would drag anchor," Crin said, "and let a few lazy Yanks stretch out to die."

"There's room for three," I suggested. "Come on, Crin, the old bird will push over."

"But I want lots of room; want to take a flop. Man, I like my red wine Bordelais, and I've sure got me a skinful this fine day." He mushed toward the bench. "I'll bet that this old jaybird has been goldbricking here for a century. Anyhow, he should be breezing into vespers with the rest of the people. I've sure got to grab a nap. Let's crowd grandpa off."

Through the north side door of St. Andrew's the endless devout stream was pouring. Some post-war tourists were among them. The city's faithful, just out from under the great load—it was 1919—were in the majority. There were, also, many Yanks. The sort of Yanks who could be turned loose in a great city and find keen interest in the mammoth Gothic structure that sends its twin spires some hundred and fifty feet heavenward. They're strange Yanks.

"Allez, Dad!" Crinnion chirped through the side of his mouth as we sat down beside the loosely smocked patriarch. "It isn't nice for a young fellow like you to be seen with a brace of slopped up Yanks."

"Cut that raw stuff, Crin. If this old coot gets wise and calls an M. P. we'll be resurfacing French roads from now on," I growled under my breath.

A smile played happily across the old man's face. Leaning back for a few minutes, Crinnion studied the smile and the great pink face under a snowfall of white.

"It's nothing to laugh at, Dad," he went on. "You're going to be late for services, and—"

"Lay off, brute," I urged, at the same time shoving his crazy bone into the granite back. "Here comes a lapdog looking for trouble—that's us, if you don't pipe down."

The M.P. stood and eyed us for a minute; then, with that fine voice of misplaced authority, gently yapped:

"Where the hell you guys from? Got a pass?"

"We're from the meathouse at the Black Prince's castle," Crinnion told him. "And, lowbrow, is that a pass or isn't it?" He presented his written pass for inspection.

"Come on! Is it or isn't it?" Crinnion insisted, coming to his feet.

"It is!" the M.P, keenly disappointed, exclaimed.

"And yours . . . You got a pass, too?" the big, goldbricking punk demanded, looking at me.

"Just like his," I said.

"That doesn't go. Let's see it."

Two broken hearts, or a heart broken in two places, within an elapsed time period of five minutes is an awful thing for any M.P.

For a long time the faithful minion of

an insidious policing body was stopped. He'd pace to the curb and, looking back over a shoulder, act as though thinking.

"Rodin might use you as a model for another great statue to be called 'The Stinker'," Crinnion suggested.

Now and then, seeing enlisted men passing on either side of the street, the M.P. would leave us for a few minutes, only to return again and pose as before.

"You sure will know us the next time you see us," Crinnion kidded, "and I hope that when that time comes we'll be in civilian clothes. Some of you M.P's are going to be mighty hard to find, once you get that band off your arm."

All this time, grown very solemn and with his smile gone, the old man sat quietly and appeared to be listening. No doubt he had a very good idea of what it was all about. The abuses perpetrated by our Military Police amounted to scandal in the eyes of the French. Their own policing system had many generations of thought and brain behind it; they knew how.

"Don't die there, soldier," Crinnion finally said.

"I'll get you birds yet," the plug ugly came back. "And you guys watch your step! You're both tanked right now."

"Make motions like a soldier," Crinnion advised. "And when we want to know who won the war, we'll call you back. And keep out of dark alleys, honey. This war is getting hard on M.P's, and that's as it should be."

An M.P, being possessed of a certain strange mentality, was always slow to give up. Our passes, proving that we were from the Army hospital, made us just a little surer of our ground and, for the M.P, harder to handle. Chances were, Crinnion and I were shell shocked nuts. The woods, and Bordeaux, was full of them—nuts. So the oppressor bit his lip, stood there and studied us. Then his eyes swung to the old man, and a mighty thought had its genesis. He stepped into the gutter.

"M.P, you're right where you belong," Crinnion mused.

The M.P. whistled for a co-worker who lounged before the *hôtel de ville* not far away.

The second M.P, scenting a chance to use his club, came a-running.

"La Plante, ask this old man if these wise guys have been bothering him," our first friend ordered.

The M.P. called La Plante, evidently of French paternity, addressed himself to the old man, did much in the line of hand waving and said something in French.

"Why, no!" the old man exclaimed in as perfect English as has ever been uttered on Beacon Hill. "These boys have been sitting here with me for more than fifteen minutes. Most certainly they have not offended me nor anybody. But, for nearly two years now, I have watched our Military Police operate here in Bordeaux, and I am almost ashamed to call myself American. In this great city of all uniforms our American boys are the only soldiers to be hounded for salutes. We, as a nation, have very little imagination. Very little."

Crinnion, pink to the ears, said—

"Let's go."

I, flabbergasted, said nothing.

The M.P's, outsmarted, went away fighting each the other. Their predatory natures could not bear up under a loss of prey.

"YOU said that you were stationed at the Black Prince's castle, that is—on the estate." The old man made conversation. "A strange place, isn't it? I mean, the ruins."

"Gosh, Dad!" Crinnion apologized. "We never supposed that you were a Yank. Sorry that we pulled a boner. It's so unusual."

"It is," the old man agreed. "I came to France back in the Eighties. I liked this Médoc country along the Garonne and stayed, lingered through a foolish youth, then—stayed—and stayed—and stayed. The very air is like the red wine of the place. My, how it holds you! The vineyards and the orchards in bloom. The broad Garonne winding seaward under high blue skies. And the history, centuries of history, behind it all. I have always been a student of history. It is my forte.

"Your hospital is situated on the very threshold of French liberty. From that sally point the Black Prince held England's sway; and a hard sway it was. But, when he went, England's power waned. And Aquitaine suffered a little longer; then was France once more. And Bordeaux bathed her wounds, trampled out the grape and guzzled red wine.

"But as to this Black Prince's reign. History calls him a good and able sovereign. But, young men, who writes history? Surely not these people of southern France. I've listened to them. Do ghosts walk at the ruined castle? The people say yes. Wonder is, if they do not. I have called it the threshold of France's liberty.

"Human life there, under the Black Prince, was held lightly. French peasants, laborers and slaveys died for his amusement. The estate, as the ruins now show, was one of many great structures. Many artisans, brought from far and near, were employed in erecting it. Touching upon those artisans, the most brutal stories came into the folklore of this place, and—"

"Pardon me, sir, just a moment . . . Hey, Crin, sit up, you big stiff! If the hounds of the law backlap and find you asleep on a public seat, it's the cooler sure."

"Aw right," he yawned. "What was that about trouble with the trade unions, Dad?"

"Coming home from an unsuccessful hunt," the old man went on, "the Black Prince, being human, would be out of spirits—"

"Here in France?" Crinnion asked innocently. "The dirty rumdum!"

"And being out of spirits, his royal blood asserted itself. They say that he would take a few of the best bowmen in his party and sneak through the woods until within arrow shot of the buildings. Then, before the men knew what was coming upon them, he and his archers would pick the artisans off as they worked high up on the roofs. That was brutal, but not too brutal for the age—or for royalty."

"He was a playful mutt, wasn't he?" Crinnion said. "The Black Prince must have been the daddy of all these M.P's."

The old American, glancing at his watch, said:

"Well, boys, I have a class at the Academy at two. I must be going. Goodby, and good luck. And with these M.P's you boys need lots of that—luck."

"Think that old boy's balmy?" Crinnion asked as he stretched his legs into the relinquished space. "Think a bird would sharpshoot workmen in cold blood like that?"

"Sure, don't you?"

"Naw-w-w!" he said. "I can't imagine shooting anybody down like that . . . Well, unless it was an M.P. or somebody equally as repulsive. Then almost—almost—al . . ." And, so help me, right there in the public square, he was asleep.

Standing in front of the *hôtel de ville*, our M.P. friends still had us under tolerance. They were waiting for the first opportunity to strike and I knew it. So I decided to keep an eye in their direction and, for the time being, permit Crinnion to snatch one of the forty. Then, if they should come our way, I'd wake him up and we'd tell those fly bozos where they got off.

"HERE comes two of the four horsemen," Crinnion said, "and I'll bet you two pairs of torn hospital pajamas and a flock of last year's magazines that they're looking for us. It's the pair of flunkies that waylaid us that day on the bench at St. Andrew's. Am I right?"

He was correct in every detail. Coming up the path were two M.P's in all their borrowed glory.

Crinnion, a gang of convalescents and I, goldbricking on the hospital piazza, smiled sweetly and hoped that the worst would happen and right now. It did.

"You birds," the loudest one said,

coming over to where we sat, "are what we're looking for."

"Gang," Crinnion said to the regulars, "don't think for a moment that these lapdogs are our friends. We're not entertaining, and if they stick around it isn't because they're welcome—"

"Close that trap or I'll drag you out cold!" the M.P. bellowed, and his reenforcement moved in closer, club ready.

"Just a minute! You're not in Prison Camp No. 2 now . . . What's wrong with these two Indians? What do you M.P's want 'em for?" the hospital sergeant was asking.

"They stuck up an old man for his roll in Bordeaux," the M.P. declared. "We caught them talking with the old gent—an American, too."

"You cockeyed liar!" Crinnion said, and reached for a fairly heavy chair. "This is just another job that you M.P's have pulled and are trying to hang on us. You don't get away with it, skunk, because we'll go right along and fight you to a fare-thee-well. That all jake with you, Sarg?" he ended, turning to the hospital attendant.

"Do you want to take these men along?" the sergeant asked.

"That's what we came for," the M.P. growled.

"O.K," the sergeant agreed. "I'll get their belongings together and you can have them. And you louse bound hounds have sure tied on to something hot."

While we waited, the M.P's stretched their legs along the piazza, and the one called La Plante, becoming much interested in the lofty ruin of the ancient castle, was heard to remark—

"Bet you could see to hell and gone from way up there."

"Must be a hundred feet high, that wall," the first M.P. judged.

"What kind of a climber are you, La Plante?" he asked a few minutes later. "I'll tell you what I'll do. Bet you a drink that I go up, along that wall, and down before you. On?"

"It's a go," La Plante said. They stripped off their web belts and automatics, shed blouses and started up.

For a few minutes they scrambled through the windows and across the buttresses of the old pile. Here and there the climb was hard, but in the end they arrived at the top of the upper parapet. Then, feeling their more treacherous way along the aged masonry, they stood outlined against the sky.

While watching, none of us had noticed Crinnion's action. When a shot busted the world wide open, and the first M.P. did a groundward dive, I knew that Crinnion was doubling for the Black Prince. And the old boy—five hundred and fifty-three years dead—must have thrilled with joy when La Plante stopped the second shot and followed his buddy. Crinnion had armed himself with one of the sidearms unbelted by the M.P's.

Then all hell seemed to break loose. Men were yelling like mad, and the whole world seemed to be rushing upon me. And, for some reason or other, I was rushing madly with the others. . . .

"KEEP quiet!" Crinnion was whispering.

My returning senses told me that we were kneeling among the devotees before a side altar where the gloom of St. Andrew's is the heaviest.

In the brighter nave of the great church, looking here and there and everywhere, stood one badly rumpled M.P.

"When I woke up," Crinnion whispered through the side of his mouth, "those two thugs had you. I busted them loose with their own club. Keep down low. You're a hell of a man—going to sleep like that! But I sure'd like to have killed me a few M.P's."

So, that's what I meant when I said that things happen in Bordeaux that never did happen, and that things that never did happen did happen. Because, even now, at times, that dream seems mighty real. And because of the happy ending—the idea of busting an M.P. with his own club—I find myself wishing it might have been a reality. For, lower than an M.P. there was nothing.

A Novelette of that Gallant Young Maverick, Tiger Eye

By B. M. BOWER

THE AIR was clean and crisp and drops of dew on the grass winked like diamonds in the sun. The horses had galloped steadily for more than a mile, but now they settled down to a walk and the reins lay loosely along their necks. Riding so, a habit born of the long trail up from Texas took hold of Tiger Eye, who was twenty and had a streak of romance hidden somewhere under his native taciturnity. Instinctively his hand went to his breast pocket and pulled out the mouth harp that had kept him company on the long trail, and he began to play soft snatches of old melodies as he rode. The music seemed to adapt its rhythm to the hoofbeats of his buckskin horse, Pecos. It timed the easy swing of the boy's slim body in the saddle, and the occasional clink of his ironbound stirrups against Babe Garner's big wooden ones. The tune did not matter; a medley of this thing and that thing drifting along with his idling thoughts.

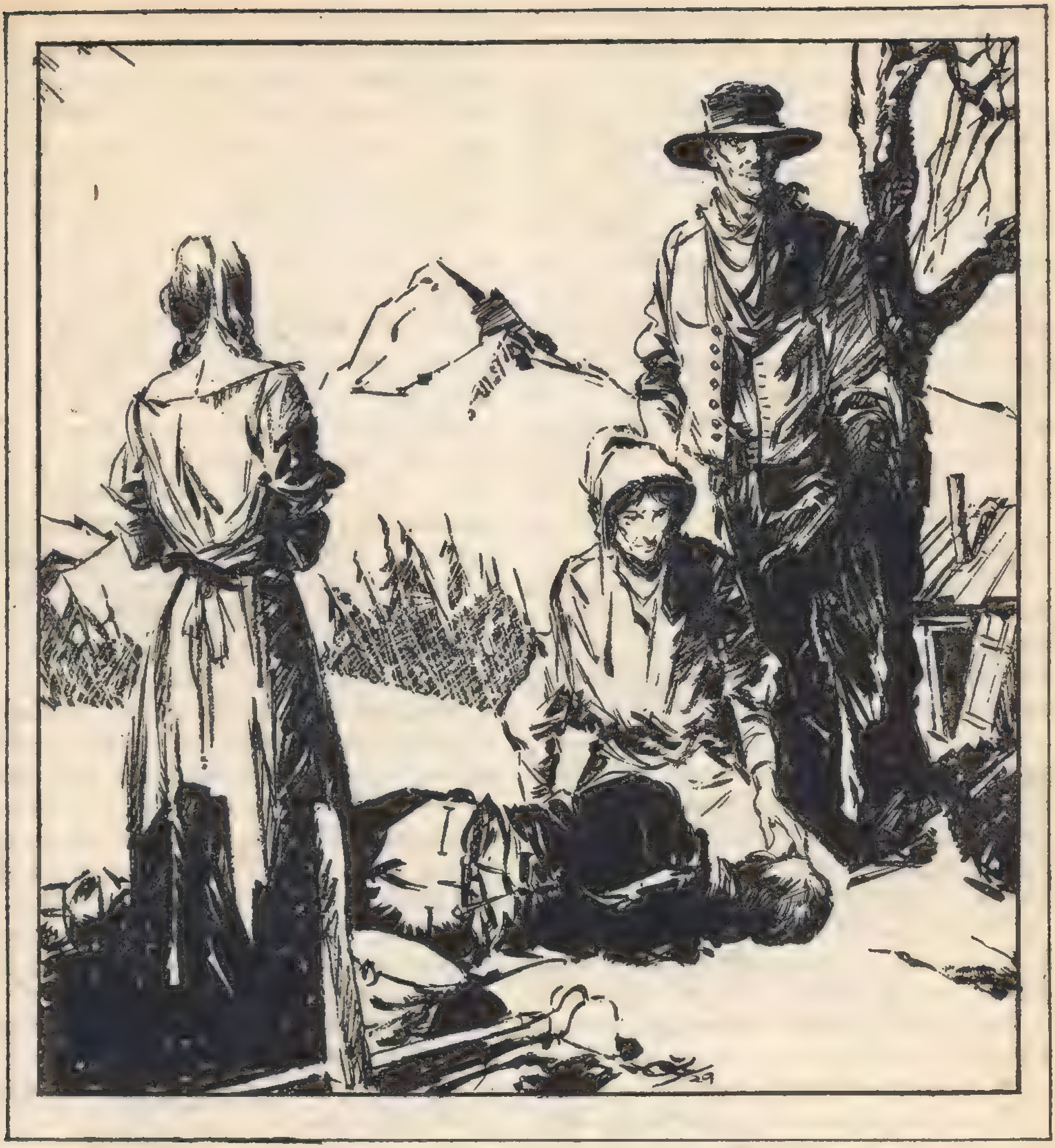
Come, love, come—the boat lies low;
The moon shines bright on the old bayou—

When the kid played that he always thought of a girl down in the valley behind him. Never saw her but once, did not even know her last name. But she seemed to come right to mind when he played that old song. Long yellow hair that made a braid as big around as your wrist and hung clear down to her waist. Reckon it must come below her knees when it was unbraided. Nellie, her old pap had called her—and the mouth harp cannily began to warble "Nellie Bly" with a gaspy silence where the high note should have been.

Reckon her old pap was a rustler, like all the rest of them down in the valley. Leastways, the kid had gathered that Nellie's brother Ed had been shot by a Poole rider, and the Poole was fighting the valley cow thieves teeth and claws. Babe Garner was a Poole rider, and he shore seemed a fine man and had promised the kid a job with the Poole.

They were heading for the home ranch right now, so the boss could look him over and give him his orders if he liked his looks. The kid hoped it wouldn't be fighting. There was shore a lot of that going on in the country, but shucks! If Tiger Eye Reeves had wanted to make a job of shooting folks he shore wouldn't have had any call to leave Texas where there was plenty of that going on.

Now and then he scanned the great level prairie and the distant mountains still capped with snow, though the horses scuffed through wild flowers down here on Big Bench. Once a spray of wild larkspur caught his eye and he leaned from the saddle and plucked it, and wore it like a cockade at the side of his big gray hat. The blue almost matched his left eye. His right was yellow and there were times when it had the cold, menacing glare of a tiger. It gave him his nickname; but even though he was only a kid, men were rather careful not to call him



KILLER REEVES' SON

Tiger Eye to his face unless they felt sure of his friendship.

Up here in Montana he didn't know any one but Babe Garner, who had done him a great favor the first time they met and who had shared grub and blankets with him at Cold Spring line camp. The kid was more grateful for Babe's friendship than he could ever find words to express, but he didn't feel that he knew Babe, even after a week of living with him.

Babe always seemed to have a lot on his mind. Laughed quite a lot and joshed a good deal, but if yo'-all just looked at his eyes he never seemed to laugh at all. Gray eyes are like that sometimes. But

Babe shore was a fine man and a fine friend, and the kid wasn't the kind to pick flaws in any one he liked.

A coyote going home late from his hunting slid up out of a shallow ditch and halted for a surprised look before he went streaking it across the prairie. Babe drew to shoot, but the report of the kid's .45 came just as Babe's gun was leaving its holster—and the kid scarcely left off his playing. He put away mouth harp and gun simultaneously as he rode over to where the coyote lay limp in the weeds along the ditch. Babe followed, holding in his horse, which didn't like coyotes dead or alive. He was looking queerly at the kid.

"You always that quick on the draw, Tiger Eye?"

"Shucks, Babe, that wasn't quick. Looked at him a second befo' I thought about shootin'." The kid was off his buckskin, turning the dead animal to inspect its hide.

Babe studied him, a frowning intentness in his gaze. Apparently the bullet hole between the coyote's slant eyes didn't interest Tiger Eye at all. It was the fur he was feeling, wondering if it were worth taking. He decided that it wasn't.

"Old he of 'em all," he drawled slightingly as he remounted Pecos and reined him across the ditch.

"Good shot," Babe tentatively praised the kid, glancing back as they rode away.

"Couldn't miss that close, Babe."

"I've saw fellers that could—flash shot like that." Babe grinned, his sidelong glance watching the kid's face.

"Couldn't around my old pappy; not and keep yoah hide on."

The kid got out his mouth harp again. So far as he was concerned the incident was closed. Shot a coyote—shucks! Not worth talking about.

BABE got out his tobacco and papers and rolled a cigaret as he rode along. He lighted it, blew out the match, broke the stick in two and dropped the pieces to the ground. The kid was watching for that little trick and his eyes twinkled when Babe's fingers went true to form. Almost a week now he had lived with Babe, and never had he seen Babe throw away a whole match stick. Always broke it in two. The kid wondered why, but he didn't ask. Pap shore had learned him not to ask questions unless he plumb had to.

Far ahead across the level benchland a faint veil of dust crept slowly toward the north, carried far on the breeze that fanned the kid's left cheek as he rode. Cattle, bunched, and riders driving 'em. The kid got that at a glance, because he knew horses would move faster, and grazing animals wouldn't kick up such a dust. The kid's eyes lingered on the low hanging dust cloud. Poole cattle, they must be. Reckon maybe Babe was taking him over so he could go to work on roundup. The kid hoped so, for that was the work he wanted and had come all the way up from the Brazos to find.

He looked at Babe and caught Babe's eyes just sliding away from him. Looking at that tiger eye, the kid reckoned. Must look plumb strange alongside a blue one, and 'peared like Babe couldn't get used to it somehow. But the kid didn't mind—not from Babe. He put away his mouth harp, lifted his big hat and ran slim brown fingers through his thick hair that just missed being a flaming red.

"Shore will enjoy swingin' a rope again, Babe," he said in his soft drawl.

"Swingin' a rope?" Babe's voice had a startled note.

"Er ridin' herd—anything, so it's cows."

The kid reckoned maybe they wouldn't put a stranger at roping right off. Had their own rope hands, he reckoned. Kinda brash of him to talk like he expected to go right to work as a top hand, yet the kid knew he could qualify all right if the Poole only gave him a chance. Shucks, of course he could swing a lass' rope! Learned to throw a loop same time he learned to ride a horse and shoot a gun, and that was so far back the kid couldn't even remember his first attempt. Pap shore started in early training his boys. Ride and shoot and lass' and keep yore mouth shut, tell the truth and give every man a square deal—the kid had learned his lessons young and he had learned them well. But he couldn't tell Babe that, of course. That would be too much like making his brag and the kid would bite his tongue off before he did that.

"You're ridin' line with me," Babe reminded him shortly. "Old Man ain't likely to put you on roundup."

The kid did not argue the point, but his eyes clung to the slow moving dust cloud, and because his heart was there he unconsciously communicated his desire to the horse. Pecos gave his head a knowing toss and lifted himself into a lope.

"O-oh I'm a poah lonesome cowboy an' fah from my
ho-ome.
An' if yo' don't like me yo' can leave me a-lo-
one—"

sang the kid.

"I was headin' for the ranch," Babe called, galloping abreast of him. "But if you want to take a look at the cattle we can swing that way, I guess. Old Man called us all in to report. We'll have to fan the breeze if we ride by the herd."

His tone was not enthusiastic, but the kid took no notice of that.

"Beat yo'-all to that line of bresh, Babe," he called, and leaned forward.

Pecos streaked it like a wolf, Babe's horse beating a swift tattoo behind him. At the line of brush that bordered a shallow water course, dry save in the time of rain or melting snows, the kid set up his buckskin in two short rabbit jumps and waited for Babe to come thundering up.

"Damn you, Tiger Eye, you got a runnin' start on me!" Babe swore, laughing away the sting of the oath.

"Shucks, Babe, yo'-all shore needs Texas trainin'," grinned the kid. "Hoss needs moah laigs, too. This heah Pecos hoss—" he caught himself back from too open a boastfulness. "Runnin' staht's what I always aim to make him git, Babe. He—he kin might' nigh outrun a bullet, I reckon."

"Yeah, he's fast," Babe conceded, riding down into the gully ahead of the kid. "This old pelter never could run for sour apples. That brown I ride, he's shore a drifter."

"Shore has got the look of one, Babe," the kid amiably agreed.

RIDERS were visible now in the fringes of the dust cloud. Riders and a slow moving river of backs seen dimly as the breeze whipped up the haze. Cattle going to some chosen roundup ground. The kid's eyes glistened at the sight and all the scenes it conjured from his memory. Dust and the bawling herd, swinging lasso and the blue, acrid smoke of branding iron eating through the hair and searing its mark in the hide. Shouts, laughter, good humored jibes, and a headlong pace to camp and the steaming Dutch ovens at supper time. Heaped up plate balanced in your lap, big cup of black coffee in your hand, fragrant steam of it in your nostrils as you blew across the surface to cool it for your thirsty lips.

"I'll ride over and see who's in charge," Babe said suddenly, and struck his horse with the quirt he carried.

The kid's hand tightened on the reins. A cold weight fell like a lump of iron upon his chest. He didn't know those riders up ahead. They were not the same old boys, with pap, tall and hawk eyed on his big horse riding here and there giving his quiet orders. Plumb strangers, these were. Babe knew them, but he didn't. He was just an outsider, and Babe wasn't taking him over to get acquainted.

The kid rode along parallel with the herd while he waited for Babe. Just loafing along, to look at him—but every nerve was alive and tingling with a complexity of emotions. The bawling of the cows and the calves, the voices of the riders shouting to one another filled him with a vague but aching loneliness. A man galloped out to meet Babe and the two talked, hands and heads making little unguarded gestures now and then. The kid's sidelong glance saw every move they made. They were talking about him, and they seemed to find a right smart to say.

Babe finally turned in his saddle and

flung out an arm in a beckoning gesture, but the kid kept his face straight ahead and gave no sign that he saw the signal. Babe cupped his hands around his mouth and let out a loud "Ya-a-hoo!" But the kid rode straight on and paid no attention. Three times Babe called, then came galloping over to where the kid lounged in the saddle, hands clasped on the horn and body swaying with the lazy grace of a panther as he rode.

"Hey, Tiger Eye! Y'asleep?"

The kid slid over so that his dangling foot might find its stirrup, and yawned as he looked at Babe.

"Yo'-all got me outa baid befo' daylight, Babe."

"Come on over and meet Jess Markel."

The kid patted back another yawn and sent a languid glance toward the rider who was loitering along, plainly expecting them.

"Ain't impawtent, is it, Babe?"

"Hell, no!" Babe gave him a speculative look. "Thought you wanted to meet the boys. You said—"

"Said I'd plumb enjoy swingin' a lass' rope. Nevah said I was achin' to meet anybody, though."

"Hunh." Babe swung in alongside, eyeing the kid with that inscrutable, sidelong glance of his. "Rode over there to see if Jess'd had any trouble with the rustlers. Some talk of their getting back up on the Bench and laying for Jess and his crew, and I kinda wanted to know if he'd saw anything of 'em." Babe scowled as if he resented having to explain. "Be hell for the Poole if they take a notion to raid a roundup over this far from the valley."

"Reckon it would, Babe."

The kid's Texas drawl was soft and friendly, but the yellow eye had its tiger look. That was because Babe Garner had lied. They had not talked about rustlers from the valley, they had talked about him. The kid wondered what they had found to say that took so long.

"Jess is wagon boss," Babe further explained. "Good man to know. Might put you on, when this trouble with the nesters is settled."

"When do yo'-all think it's going to be, Babe?"

"When there ain't any more nesters left in the valley." Babe's smile left no mystery in his meaning.

"Take a heap o' killin', Babe."

"Not so much. They'll take the hint and move out when they find they can't buffalo the Poole. Well, you goin' over and say hello to Jess?" Babe's eyes were coldly scrutinizing the kid, though his lips were smiling.

"Reckon I bettah make shore of my job, first. And if yo'-all want me line ridin' ovah on the rim, I'd love to stay with yo'."

"Jess is a Texas man, too," Babe remarked in too casual a tone. "Thought maybe you might know him. Don't the name mean anything, Tiger Eye?"

The kid laughed a lazy chuckle and pulled out his mouth harp again, wiping it on his sleeve.

"Shucks, Babe, names don't nevah mean anything to a Texas man. Not up No'th. Plumb easy to lose yo' Texas name on the trail."

"Did you?" It was a bold question to ask in those days, but the kid shook his head in good natured denial while he drew the mouth harp idly across his lips.

"Ain't wore my name only twenty yeahs, Babe. No call to change it yet."

Babe accepted the reproof and said no more, though his eyes stole many a sidelong glance at the kid. In unspoken agreement they touched spurs to their horses and went galloping steadily across the flowered prairie at right angles to the herd, toward a timbered butte that seemed to mark the northern boundary of the Big Bench. This way lay the headquarters ranch of the Poole, which was in reality a firm of Eastern capitalists dabbling in range investments.

THE POOLE owners never saw their cattle. John Poole, president of the Poole Land and Cattle Company, gave orders from his New York office and expected to see the result translated into columns of figures on the balance sheets. So many cattle, so many miles of range, so many men drawing so much money for their work. This sum for cost of operation, that sum deducted for normal loss, and the investment paying a certain percentage to the shareholders. If the losses rose the profits dropped in direct ratio. Winter blizzards, drouth that parched the range, the depredations of wolves and mountain lions and coyotes had their place in the books of the New York office and were called Normal Loss. But when the calf tally dwindled out of all proportion to adverse weather conditions John Poole sat up in his office chair and dictated a letter to his superintendent. Rustlers or disease or whatever the cause, this alarming shrinkage must stop right there.

The superintendent was an old range man named Walter Bell and he was growing rich at managing the Poole. How he was doing it does not concern us now, but at any rate he wanted to keep his job. He replied to that letter and he didn't beat around the bush. The nesters, he said, were rustlers in reality and were stealing the Poole blind. John Poole replied that Bell must know what medicine to use on rustlers, and Bell wrote back that he did, but it would cost some money. John Poole had built railroads in his time and he was not afraid of high initial costs, so he wrote Bell to damn the expense but to clear the range of all cow thieves.

So Bell went quietly and methodically to work, hiring men skilled in the fine art of administering leaden pills as required, with no talk or fuss about it. Already the nesters in the valley were learning to ride carefully with loaded rifles across their thighs, and to hint darkly at Texas killers on the Poole payroll, when Tiger Eye Reeves rode up the long trail from the Brazos, dreaming his dreams and playing his mouth harp as he came.

II

A BROWN line in the prairie marked where a wagon road lay along the northern edge of the Big Bench to a point where it dipped suddenly into a grassy hollow. The timbered butte rose boldly up from the level land beyond like a huge green fist laid upon the prairie with one green finger pointing toward the east. That, Babe said, was Cotton Creek. They swung into the trail and rode through a low haze of dust kicked up by other galloping horses and not yet settled. The kid's quick glance took in every detail with a young eagerness to see new places, and yet with a wariness as instinctive as the sharp eyed watchfulness of any wild thing. If he never rode this way again he would always remember just how the butte thrust up from the level floor of the prairie and how Cotton Creek ran straight away to the east.

"We lost time," said Babe. "Some of the boys got in ahead."

The kid said nothing. He put away his mouth harp and pulled his big hat a half inch lower over his straight dark brows. He had forgotten the wild larkspur tucked under the leather band. It still stood straight and unwilted, vivid against the gray. He looked as though he were going to see his girl with a flower in his hat and a half smile on his lips.

Saddled horses stood in the shade of a big cottonwood tree, some still breathing quickly from hard riding, others resting a leg while they dozed. These awakened with a start as the two rode into the unfenced yard. Lean riders perched on the top rail of the nearby corral or squatted on boot heels against the fence, smoking and talking in desultory fashion of this thing and that. The kid felt them eyeing him as he swung down from Pecos and followed Babe, walking stiffly on his high heeled boots. They all spoke to Babe, but they didn't smile at the sight of him. The kid tilted his head in response to a nod or two, and took his place at one side of the group—the right side, which left his gun arm free and gave him a clear path to his horse.

The kid didn't consciously take that position, any more than a wolf consciously seeks a high point to scan new territory before he ventures into it. It was born in his blood, forced into the plastic brain stuff of his childhood, taught him in the growing years when Killer Reeves had an eagle eye always open for fool tricks in his sons. These men were strange to him. You just never did take a chance with plumb strangers.

Babe left him, going on to the house where he knocked on a door. Without turning his head, the kid knew which door, and he knew that a girl opened it and let Babe in. Babe touched his hat but he didn't take it off when he went into the house, and for that he fell a notch in the kid's esteem. Babe shore never did show his manners that time, but the kid reckoned maybe folks up North had different ways.

Sly eyes watched the kid, but nobody said much. When they did speak some voices had the slow drawl of the South and they slurred vowels and dropped R's in a way so familiar to the kid that he could almost forget how far he was from the Brazos. But there were two that had the flat tone of the North, and these presently fell into amiable dispute over the date and circumstance of a killing ten years old and over the line in Canada. Plumb foolish to argue over a thing like that, the kid thought, though he listened with the others. Plumb foolish, but safe, since the killer was caught and hanged long ago.

Of the trouble with the nesters down in the valley no one spoke a word, though that subject loomed large in the consciousness of every man present. The kid wondered whether these men with the look and tone of the South were the ones the nesters called Texas killers. They might be, though no face there was known to him. Texas was a big place. He didn't know all the killers within its borders. The Poole didn't need to send South for killers, the kid thought sardonically. He reckoned there were plenty in Montana.

The two with the flat voices rambled on, gossiping of range matters and drawing maps of creeks and cañons and trails in the dust at their feet, and arguing over the distance from this place to that. Foolish talk, seeing the places were all away up yonder in Canada and nobody had any call to ride that way. The kid watched them pointing and waggling their heads, and his lips curled in disdain. The others—four of them, lean and tanned and saying little—smoked and listened. Texas men don't talk unless they got something to say. The kid felt a faint glow of pride in them because they were his breed of men.

Babe was a long time in the house. 'Peared like he must have a right smart to say to the Old Man. The kid's feet grew tired, standing there leaning against the fence, but he didn't sit down. You don't feel much like hunkering down on your heels unless you know the folks you're settin' with. Pap never did—and pap was the kid's law and gospel of the range. Anyway, Babe would come along back any minute now.

Another man rode up, some foreman or other. He told them to feed their horses and stay for dinner, and the group stirred and went off to attend to their mounts. The kid loosened the saddles on Pecos and Babe's horse, slipped off their bridles and turned them in the corral. He took more time about it than the others did, and he did not join them again in the shade of the cottonwood by the creek, but sat on the log frame of the manger over at the far side of the corral where the horses were nosing and chewing and tossing hay in their search for the tenderest spears. He could see through the corral poles, but the men over there didn't seem to take any notice of him, so after a bit he began playing on his mouth harp, breathing softly into it and smothering the sound with his hands. Pecos reached over and poked the kid's big hat to one side with his nose, a long wisp of hay dangling from his mouth; but his master only fended off further nudges with his elbow and went on with his serenade.

"Listen To The Mocking Bird" played the kid, with soft warblings and twitterings between the strains of music.

'Peared like there weren't any songbirds up North. Not like the old mockers down on the Brazos. No birds up thisaway that could sing worth shucks. Medderlark—but you couldn't rightly call those few chirpings a song. That old mocker in the hackberry tree by the creek at home. Lawdy, how he could talk! Come a full moon, and the mosquitoes humming and the frogs a-croaking all up and down the medder creek, and that mocker singing in the hackberry tree—

THE KID blinked his long lashes very fast for a minute, and sat up straight, slipping his mouth harp into his breast pocket. Babe's voice calling out some careless remark to the foreman came to him at last, and over at the log house beyond the cottonwood some one was pounding on a tin pan to say dinner was ready. Men were already splashing at the wash basin on the bench outside the door when the kid came up, and he stood back and waited his turn, a bashful boy among hard faced men whose minds seemed wholly engrossed with the business of going fresh washed and sleekly combed to their dinner.

Babe emptied his basin with a fling of soapy water into the bushes at the end of the house, gave the basin to the kid and went inside. But he stopped just within the door and stared back over his shoulder at the kid, for all the world as if he were expecting something.

The kid dipped water from the big bucket standing there—gently, lest the splash should drown some little sound he ought to hear; some little sound Babe was listening for, there inside the door. He dipped in his hands, washed his face and wiped it on a clean edge of the roller towel, every sense alert, every nerve taut.

Somebody coming across the yard, walking kinda slow and careful. Hungry men don't walk thataway to their dinner. The kid took out his little black pocket comb, unfolded it and leaned to the wavy mirror in its cheap frame. He looked within and drew the comb through his thick, wavy locks that just missed being red. Babe was still standing just inside the door, still looking out at the kid, waiting for him; waiting for something else, too.

But even though Babe stood there waiting, he jumped when the kid whirled and fired. Even though he was looking, he did not actually see the kid draw his gun. All Babe could have sworn to afterward was that the kid stood bent a little, combing his hair before a looking glass hung for tall men; and then the kid was facing the other way with a smoking six-shooter in his hand. Babe was pretty quick with a gun himself, but he wasn't so quick you couldn't see him draw.

The kid ducked past the window and then backed slowly, keeping close to the wall. His yellow right eye had the cold, menacing glare of a tiger as he watched the men rushing out to see what had happened. Twenty feet away a man steadied himself and reached backward with his left hand, and the kid saw and let him get the gun before he fired again. The man dropped the second gun and stood there holding two bloody fists out before him, staring from them to the kid.

"Yo'-all stop wheah yo're at," the kid said to those at the door, and they halted on the broad step.

"I'll kill yo' fo' this, Tiger Eye Reeves!" raved the man with the bloody fists.

"Yo' cain't," the kid replied in his melodious drawl. "Yo' nevah will shoot no moah, Jess Markel."

"Fer gawd's sake, Tiger Eye!" cried Babe from the step. "What's it all about? You said you didn't know Jess."

"I nevah did say I don't know Jess," the kid corrected Babe. "I said men easy drop theah Texas names on the trail up heah—I nevah did say I don't know that lobo."

"Git 'im, boys!" raved Jess, holding out his two shattered hands. "That's Killer Reeves' youngest boy—and the worst of the lot! Look what he done to me!" Jess was half crying with rage, but the kid smiled.

"I nevah do bust down on a hand 'lessen theah's a gun in it."

"What you pull a gun on him for, Jess?" The foreman walked, scowling, toward the wounded man. "The kid's dead right. You had your guns out when he shot."

"He's Killer Reeves' son, didn't I tell yo'-all? His pap killed my pap, that's why."

"Yore pap nevah did draw quick enough," the kid reminded him. "'Pears like slowness runs in yo' family, Jess. Shootin' in the back's moah yo'-all's style."

"He's a damn' killer and the son of a killer!" shouted Jess.

"I don't nevah shoot a man in the back, like yo' tried to do," the kid said coldly.

"Tiger Eye Reeves!" said one of the furtive eyed men on the step, and the kid turned and stared in unblinking rebuke.

"My name's Bob, suh. It's only friends can call me Tiger Eye."

WALTER BELL himself came with long, angry steps from the house. The girl was standing on the porch gazing curiously at the disturbance. Slim little thing with dark hair tied at the back of her neck with a big, wide bow of ribbon. Dark eyebrows—but the kid was too far away to see the color of her eyes. Walter Bell stopped and looked at Jess Markel's hands, gave a grunt and came striding up to face the kid, who looked mild and harmless enough now, except for that staring tiger eye of his.

"You the fellow that shot my wagon boss?" Bell snapped, his gaze avoiding that yellow eye.

"Yes, suh."

"You've crippled him for life. Know that?"

"Yes, suh. That's what I aimed to do."

"Did, eh? You'll have to show a damn' good reason for that, young man."

"Yes, suh. I was combin' my hair and I saw Jess slippin' up, aimin' to shoot me in the back. Seems like a Markel cain't face a man in theah killin's, nohow. He cain't kill no mo'—'lessen he kicks 'em like a mule."

"Jess had both guns out, Mr. Bell," the foreman here remarked, and pointed to the blood stained six-shooters on the ground. "The kid's telling it straight."

"Shore is, Mr. Bell," Babe spoke up, and left the step to go over to the kid. "I was waitin' while he combed his hair. He was lookin' in the glass. I didn't see him draw, but I saw him shoot. He must'a' saw Jess comin' at him in the lookin' glass."

"You didn't see him draw?"

"No. I was lookin' at him, but I didn't see him draw."

"I was comin' from the stable and I saw the whole thing," said the foreman. "Young Reeves was combin' his hair, just as he says. Jess pulled his gun and Reeves, here, whirled and shot. He must have drawed his gun, but I never saw him do it. He sure as hell wasn't combing his hair with his six-gun—"

The group at the mess house door laughed at that, and Walter Bell turned on Jess.

"You brought it on yourself," he growled. "Come on up to the house and I'll fix you up till you can get to a doctor. And I want the rest of you men to distinctly understand that I didn't hire you to work out your own private grudges against each other. Any more shooting among yourselves, I'll have the one that does it sent up for murder. Reeves, I'll see you at the house after dinner."

"Yes, suh."

"You done right, Tiger Eye," said Babe as the two lingered outside.

"Shore tried to, Babe."

"I thought Jess acted kinda funny, when we was over there at the roundup. He asked me who I had with me, and I said a young feller from down on the Brazos. He wanted your name and I give it to him. He never said anything, but I suspicioned he knowed you or had heard of you, just by his looks. But you never let on like you knowed him, so I let it pass." Babe gave the kid a sharp, sidelong look. "I was just tryin' to make up my mind whether I oughta tell you what I suspicioned about Jess, when the play come off."

The kid drew a long, relieved breath and looked at Babe with the old faith shining in his eyes.

"Shore glad yo' told me now, Babe. I plumb knowed there was something passed between yo' and Jess up theah on the Bench."

"Well, that was it. You're such a tight mouthed cuss I kinda hated to butt in—but I guess I needn't 'a' worried. Gosh, you're quick with a gun! Come on and eat, Tiger Eye."

"Shore will eat with moah appetite now, Babe," said the kid softly, and followed Babe inside.

Men who had ignored him before hitched themselves along to make room for the kid on the long bench beside the table. Platters of meat, round enamel basins of potatoes, beans, stewed corn, thick brown gravy came his way faster than he could spoon the food out upon his plate. Sugar and canned milk were pressed upon him.

The kid thanked them for each proffered service and devoted himself strictly to the business of eating. No one mentioned Jess Markel or the shooting or the fact that Killer Reeves and his sons were not unknown to them. They'd do their talking after awhile when the kid was not there to hear. Just what they would say did not greatly concern him. Give him credit for knowing how to handle a gun, he reckoned. Tell how Tiger Eye Reeves was counted the fastest and straightest shooter on the whole length of the Brazos, maybe. Tell how his old pap had raised a whole passel of boys in the saddle, with a six-gun in one hand and a lass' rope in the other. Tell how Killer never went for his gun 'lessen the other man made the first play, and how he always did get his man shot first. Tell—if they didn't feel too friendly to Jess Markel—how Jess's old pap had got more than one man when he wasn't looking and prepared, and how he tried to get pap thataway, only pap saw him out the tail of his eye and whirled and shot true. Tell plenty, the kid reckoned, but they wouldn't have anything to say to his face.

"You'll get the job, all right," Babe said in his ear, when the two paused outside in the shade to roll and light a cigaret apiece before the kid went up to interview Walter Bell.

Jess, on his way to the stable with the foreman, scowled and turned his face the other way, walking wide of the kid. Both hands were bandaged and carried in a sling before him and he looked sick. The kid's lips tightened a little as Jess passed. Never lay behind another rock waiting to shoot a man in the back—Jess wouldn't. Never try to slip up on anybody again combing their hair with their back toward him. Killer—but he never would kill again. Not after those smashed knuckles got well. They'd be stiff as sticks. Jess would lose some of his fingers, the kid reckoned hopefully.

"You done right, kid." Babe flicked his thumbnail across a match head, lighted his cigaret and snapped the stick in two pieces before he dropped them at his feet. "He'd 'a' got you and never give warnin'. Damn' sneak! Didn't think Jess was that kinda man."

"If every killah had his hands broke, this would be a right peaceful land, Babe."

Babe shivered in spite of himself.

"I'd as soon be killed as crippled," he said shortly.

"Shucks! Yo' ain't a killah, Babe. Man's got a right to defend himself. That's what pap always said. Yo' wouldn't shoot a man 'lessen he came at yo' with his gun out, Babe."

"Shore not." Babe shot a keen glance at the kid. "Come on and talk to the Old Man. Just red tape, but you oughta meet him. He told me he'd put you on and let you ride rim with me."

"Shore is mighty fine of yo', takin' all this trouble fo' me," murmured the kid, his heart pulsing with shy gratitude as he followed Babe up to the house.

III

THE KID pulled up on the rim of the Big Bench and stared down into the valley below. It was not the first time he had ridden that way, and the bold lines of the bluffs with the deep coulees creeping back under the rim to hide the ranches from the keen winds of winter looked familiar as a picture that used to hang at the foot of his bed, down home on the Brazos. Like the picture, this view held within it a certain remoteness which the kid felt, but could not explain.

Nesters lived down there in the valley. Every coulee ranch held an enemy of the Poole. The cattle he saw grazing over there in the bottomland might be Poole cattle, rustled when they were sucking calves and branded with a nester's brand. That's what Babe said they were, only the Poole couldn't prove it.

Nesters shore would bushwhack any Poole rider they could catch down there in the valley. The kid didn't need to take Babe's word for that, because he had found it out for himself. Got a bullet through his hat crown first time he had ever pointed old Pecos' nose down into the valley. Met a nester in the main road—Nate Wheeler, his name was—and the first thing the kid knew he was being shot at. Shooting, too—but not to kill. Plumb obliged to put a bullet through the feller's gun arm, though. And Babe happened along right then and thought the kid had missed, so Babe dropped Nate Wheeler right there in his tracks. Shore was a bad mistake on Babe's part, but white of him, too, taking the part of a plumb stranger thataway.

The kid's gaze wandered over to the coulee where Nate Wheeler had lived. Shore was a plumb shame, busting up a home thataway, but the kid couldn't see where any one was to blame save Wheeler himself. Couldn't blame Babe Garner for not knowing this was Tiger Eye Reeves come up from the Brazos. How could Babe know that Tiger Eye Reeves never missed putting a bullet right where he wanted it, any more than he'd miss his mouth when he lifted a hot biscuit up to bite it? Couldn't blame Babe for thinking the kid shot wild; not then. Now, Babe would know better than to buy into any of Tiger Eye's shooting.

There were things the kid would like to ask Babe about the valley. That ranch out a ways from the rim, not in the coulee but tucked down behind a low ridge where the long streak of cottonwoods showed there was a creek—the kid would like to know the name of the folks who lived there. But he couldn't ask, or Babe might kinda suspicion it was the girl, Nellie, that the kid wanted to know about. He'd want to know a lot of things the kid had no intention of telling. About Nellie's old pap getting hurt, and the kid helping him and the girl get away from a no-account nester named Pete Gorham. Reckon if Babe knew about that time he might think Tiger Eye had more truck with nesters than he should have, being a Poole man and all.

The kid focused his field glasses on the ridge, but he couldn't see anything but a fence running up along the side. The ranch was over behind, about where the line of cottonwoods quit. Old pappy wasn't feeling right good when the kid left him and the girl the other day; had a knock on the head that might turn out kinda bad. Seemed like he oughta ride down there and see how the old feller was getting along, anyway. Take it down that draw running out from the Bench, and he could get plumb over to the lower end of the ridge without showing himself. Plumb foolish to follow the trails, but down that draw—shucks! Wouldn't take but a minute to ride down and see how her old pappy was feeling. Babe never need to know a thing about it.

So the kid went down into the valley where the nesters would shoot a Poole rider like a coyote. Babe had told him to ride across the Bench to the river and scout around there for any sign of branding fires or cattle held within corrals hidden in the thickets. Babe said he could lie up on the rim rock with his glasses and find out more about what was going on over there than a dozen men riding through the bottomland could, and the kid was to take a lunch and stay till sundown or after. Babe was going around the other way, so the two would spend the day scanning the river bottom from opposite sides of the valley. They ought to get a pretty fair idea of what was going on down there, taking both sides like that.

The kid felt pretty guilty and mean,

going off like this on a side trip of his own, but he didn't feel guilty enough to turn back from the quest of Nellie's home and Nellie's last name. Bothered him so he couldn't get her outa his mind—like a song when you know part of the tune and can't think of the rest of it. He wouldn't have known her first name, even, if her old pappy hadn't called her by it that day when the kid had happened along in time to save them both from that skunk of a nester, Pete Gorham. Reckon he had a right to know what her name was, seeing he had saved her old pappy's life. Saved her, too—but the kid shut that thought out of his mind; it swept him into so deadly a rage against Pete Gorham.

It was farther to the ridge than it had looked through the field glasses. The kid kept to the bottom of the draw, which was rough with rocks sluiced down in spring freshets. These Pecos avoided with dainty steps and a disdainful sniff or two at the worst places. The kid did not hurry him. Pecos knew his business better than most men. He went along, taking plenty of time on the bad stretches and making up for it with a smooth, swift trot when he reached grassy turf as the draw widened.

By the time he reached the lower end of the ridge the kid realized that he was head and shoulders above the level of the valley. But the ridge was friendly and shielded him from view to the south, and the brushy undergrowth along the creek gave protection there. He felt safe enough to give his full attention to the ranch he was approaching.

THIS WAS where Nellie lived. The kid knew, because he had watched her drive up behind this ridge with her old pappy in the back of the wagon where the kid had laid him carefully on an old quilt—and the old rip had revived enough to sit up and help himself to whisky, as the kid had plainly seen through his field glasses. Yes, sir, she lived right up this road a piece. The kid's heart thumped so he could feel it, until it occurred to him that she might be away somewhere, when it stopped dead still for a minute. But the heart of youth is a resilient organ, and the kid's righted itself presently as he rode forward and unhooked the gate, swinging it open as Pecos sidled through and turned skilfully, pushing the gate shut with his shoulder as he went up to the post and stopped. The kid had taught Pecos that and Pecos was consciously proud of the trick.

The kid's heart was normal when he started on, but it began to beat double time when he came in sight of the stable and corral and the house sitting back out of the way against the ridge.

The kid was glancing this way and that, to the garden patch, the grove, the corral, the house, looking for a girl with yellow hair so thick the braid was as big around as his wrist right where his shirt sleeve buttoned, and so long the braid hung down to her waist. Wonderful hair. The kid had seen it flying loose when she ran from Pete Gorham, and it had looked like a banner of gold whipping in the sun. It made a funny kind of lump in his throat just to think of the way she looked with all that hair flying loose. Like an angel in a gingham dress, kinda.

The sharp, venomous crack of a rifle up on the ridge behind the house struck away those thoughts. The kid did not dodge, for he knew the bullet had sped on its way seconds ahead of the sound. He wheeled Pecos off the road and in behind a half demolished haystack and halted him there, listening. Thinking, too, with the thoughts flashing clean and true from his brain trained in the hard school of a killer father. No bullet coming this way, or he'd have heard it. Shooting in another direction—

And then he heard the piercing shriek of a woman. The kid knew that sound bitterly well and a hot crimple went up his spine. His mother had screamed like that when brother Ben fell dead in the front yard. The kid jumped Pecos out from behind the stack with one savage lift of his spurs, and went thundering up the road. No need to fear a bullet now from that rifle. Killers don't wait, when a woman raises the death scream. Killers run for their horse and get away quick.

Wailing, and excited, the jumbled words were breaking oddly on the high tones.

"Nellie, come quick! They've got him—they've killed him—oh, my God! Come and help get him in—they've killed him. Oh, he's dead—"

Too well the kid knew that tragic litany. His mother, his sisters—so had they keened their dead in the old house by the Brazos. His lips pressed into a thin line. His twinkling blue eye half closed to let the tiger look through that yellow right eye of his. He stepped down from the saddle and ran and knelt on one knee beside the wailing woman who was huddling to her breast the lolling old head of her man, her shaking fingers threading distractedly through his hair that was no whiter than her face.

"Ma'am, take away yo' ahms, till I tote him inside."

She looked up at him blankly, her eyes too full of her tragedy to see aught else. And she cried that they had killed him, cried it again and again.

"I reckon so, ma'am," the kid said gently. "If yo'-all would leave go till I can get a holt—"

Then Nellie came running from somewhere up along the base of the ridge. She had a hoe in one hand and a bucket half filled with yellow kernels of corn. Her checked gingham sunbonnet was hanging on her shoulders, her thick braid of yellow hair was pulled forward over her breast. Even at that tragic moment when she stopped to stare unbelievingly, the kid noticed how nearly her hair matched the kernels of corn in the rusty lard bucket.

"You! What've you done? What'd you do it for? Ma—oh, mother, *don't!*"

Pity tore at the kid's heart as he looked at the two of them cowering together, the girl's arms clutching her mother as if she would hold her back by the force of her young arms from the grief there before them. But his voice was gently insistent.

"If yo' would get her away so I can tote him inside—"

"Come, mother." She pulled and coaxed. "We must get him in. You go fix the bed, mother—"

"Yes—yes, I'll go spread up the bed—"

Like his own mother, when they toted pap into the house. Leave off her screaming to go smooth the bed covers and pat the pillow for the dead that could not feel or thank her for it. Spread up the bed, lay the pillows just so—Nate Wheeler's wife had done that, too. Killer crooks his finger on the trigger, and some woman must go pat a pillow for her dead to lay his head upon for the last time. Fight over the brand on a cow or calf, lift a gun and pull the trigger.

Yo'-all can take the life out of a man easy enough—but yo'-all can't never put it back again. Lump of lead no bigger than the end of yo'-all's finger shot into a big strong man—and some woman walks the floor nights crying and moaning for her man.

The kid ground his teeth together till they ached, and in his heart he cursed all killers. Let them wait until they were able to put the life back into a man, before they shot it out of him. Like what the preacher read out of the Bible at all the funerals in the Reeves family—funerals enough to imprint the solemn words indelibly on the memory of the kid—

"The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away—"

Killers acted like they had as much right as the Lord had. They'd take away life, but they couldn't give it.

With the limp, bony old man sagging a dead weight in his young arms the kid went into the house, ducking his head in the doorway so his hatcrown could pass in free. They built their doors higher down home, but that was because Killer Reeves bred tall sons like himself and they must have head room as they came and went. Little short old man, this one had been. Tote him in easy as a kid asleep. Lay him on the smoothed bed, put his head on the patted pillow, tuck a folded sheet under his shoulders where the blood seeped out.

No use to look at the wound, no use to disturb the chilling body. Little old pappy had been shot in the back when he walked out into the yard. Killer's work. Dry gulched, they called it up here. Killer waiting behind a rock with a rifle ready till his man came along. Then pull the trigger a time or two, look to see if the bullets went straight—and then run for a horse tied somewhere outa sight.

THE KID'S face was bleak and old when he turned from the bed and the little old woman kneeling beside it, her arms thrown out clutching her dead with the tensity of despair. Nellie was holding herself calm in spite of her horror. Somebody had to, and the girl's slim shoulders had straightened to the load of responsibility. The kid turned and saw that she was dipping water into the wash basin for him on the bench beside the back door. Then he remembered her words and halted, looking at her strangely.

"Yo'-all couldn't think I done it," he said. "I'd do anything I could fo' yo'-all. Shore wouldn't hahm yo' pappy. He was shot in the back, from somewheah up on the hill. I was on the road coming along by the old stack. Yo'-all can go look at the hoss tracks and see fo' yo'self."

"I don't have to. I know you didn't do it. I don't know what made me say that, Mister—"

"Reeves," said the kid, flushing a little. "Bob Reeves is my name, Miss—"

"Murray," said the girl, and put up a hand to smooth her hair. "What shall we do?" She bit her lips, fighting back tears, and the color crept into her cheeks as she met the kid's grave look.

"I'll stay heah, Miss Murray, while yo'-all go fo' help. I'd go myself, but I couldn't do no good. Some nestah would try and shoot me fo' a Poole ridah, I reckon. If theah's a hoss yo' can ride—"

"I could ride Prince, but he's up in the pasture and he's awful mean to catch."

The kid nodded, wiping his hands on a clean towel patched in the middle.

"I reckon I can get 'im. My hoss is plumb foolish ovah any ridah but me, or I'd let yo' take him."

"No, you'll have to be ready to go before anybody gets here. Prince is the sorrel with one white eye. Oh, hurry!"

No need to hurry now, though the kid did not tell her so. He rode into the pasture and roped the sorrel with the white eye, found a side saddle and put it on with meticulous care. A crimple went up his spine when he held down his hand and she placed her foot in his palm and went up light as a feather lifted on a breeze. He gave her the reins and his quirt that he had braided in the bunkhouse down on the Brazos. He watched her slip the rawhide loop over her wrist and then she remembered something and pulled it off again.

"No, you'll have to go before I get back and you'll need this," she said. "I couldn't give it to you—"

"Yo' can keep it," said the kid, blushing under his tan. "I got anothah one in camp. Made it myself," he added shyly.

The girl looked at him, glanced toward the cabin where her mother was weeping in great, heavy, heartbreaking sobs.

"I'm—we're much obliged, Mr. Reeves. You—you always come when I—when we need help. Promise you won't stay till they come back with me. And—and tell mother not to say you've been here. The—the neighbors hate Poole riders. They've swore they'll shoot any Poole man on sight if they catch him in the valley. You be careful, won't you, Mr. Reeves?"

"Shore will," murmured the kid.

"It'll take about an hour. You better go right now. I—mother'll be all right. Promise you'll go!"

"I promise to go—but I cain't promise I won't come back."

He watched her ride off at a gallop, her gingham skirt whipping out beside the sorrel's flanks, her yellow braid swinging in the breeze. Shore plucky, holding back her tears for her old pappy thataway. The kid thought she was the pluckiest and the prettiest girl he ever had seen. His eyes shone and his mouth relaxed into a softer curve of the lips as he watched her out of sight.

HIS GLANCE fell then to the trampled dirt under his feet, and the bleak look returned to his face. Her old pappy had fallen right there where the kid was standing. There was the imprint of his body in the dust, the grim significance of the stained earth, the blurred marks where the woman had knelt. The kid turned and scanned the ridge. Its side was mostly brushy and with a stunted tree growing here and there; but at the top there was a rough outcropping of brown sandstone with rock slabs tilted this way and that. His eyes went to that point with unerring precision. A man always wants a rock or two in front of him when he's fixing to bushwhack somebody. Reckon that's because he's a coward. Bushes are fine to hide in, but bushes don't stop bullets and a coward won't take a chance. Don't aim to give a feller a chance to shoot back, but all the same he wants a rock up in front of him just in case.

The kid was sure the killer had waited behind those rocks; just as sure as if he had seen him there. But he didn't go up there right then. Right smart of a climb up through the brush. No use hurrying now, after it was all over. He went into the house instead and stood with his hat in his hand, looking down at the dead man, and at the woman huddled on the floor beside the bed. Quieter now, the first storm of grief sweeping on to leave her dull and apathetic.

The kid tiptoed over to the far side of the room and brought a rocking chair, set it down beside the bed and lifted the little woman gently and put her in the chair. Nellie's mother; yellow hair turned gray, blue eyes blurred, flour on her wrists. Mixing pie crust, maybe, or bread, when trouble came barking at her door.

The kid stood looking down at her for a minute, then tiptoed to the big old bureau and pulled a top drawer open. Texas or Montana, it didn't make much difference to a woman. Kept her handkerchiefs and best towels in the top drawer just the same. It seemed to the kid as if he were getting a handkerchief for his mother—or a clean sheet to pull over the family's dead.

Her fingers opened to take the handkerchief but she did not look up at him. Her eyes followed the careful shrouding of the still form on the bed. She watched him tiptoe into the kitchen, open the oven door and take out two berry pies and set them on the clean scrubbed table. No use letting things burn in the oven just because the man they were made for had been shot down in his own dooryard. The kid's mother had taught her boys to be thoughtful of little things in the house.

The kid took the two tin water buckets and followed a path from the back door to a spring, and brought back two buckets full and set them on the bench without spilling a drop. He took a heavy goblet from the dish cupboard, filled it with cool water and brought it in to Nellie's mother. She looked at him then; looked at him long before she took the glass and drank.

"You're a good boy," she said. "Where you from?"

"Brazos," said the kid, hoping she would not ask too much.

Evidently she thought Brazos was the name of a town, for she let the word pass unchallenged.

"They shot my Ed—that was last month. He laid out all night before he was found. Now they've killed my husband. I hope they're satisfied. If there's a God in heaven, may He punish the Poole as they deserve! If there is a God," she added bitterly.

"I reckon theah is, ma'am, only I reckon folks ain't moah impawtent to Him than a bird in a bush." The kid looked out of the window, considering a matter which always stirred him vaguely. "Folks calls theahselves impawtent," he said gently. "But I reckon a mothah bird's heart aches too when a snake eats its little ones."

"You're a good boy. Where's Nellie?" She stared around her.

The kid told her, but she did not seem to listen. She returned to her weeping. The kid wished she wouldn't cry like that; she sounded so much like his mother when pap lay on the bed under a sheet. Killers oughta be made to sit and listen to the widows of the men they shot in the back. That killer waiting up there behind the rocks—if he could take the suffering he handed out to other folks, and if he had to bear it all himself— But killers don't care. A killer has got no heart. Only pap, he had a heart big as an ox. Folks just kept on making pap kill. He didn't want to. It was the first fight, when he killed his first man. Somebody always trying to beat pap to the draw, after that. He had to go on killing to save himself.

This was different. This was more like Jess Markel's work, only Jess wouldn't do any more bushwhacking from behind rocks. The kid had fixed that. Time Jess's knuckles got well he wouldn't be able to pull a trigger. Like he told Babe, the kid still thought it would be a heap better country if yo'-all could bust the gun hand of every killer in it. Nellie's old pappy wouldn't be lying in there now under a sheet if some one had shot the trigger finger off the shunk that lay up behind the rock. Nellie's brother would be alive, too, if it wasn't for some sneaking coward that was able to handle a gun.

The kid turned on the doorstep and leaned his head in at the doorway.

"Goodby, ma'am," he called softly. "Reckon I'll have to be goin' now."

"Goodby," she answered brokenly. "Look out them Poole killers don't get you!"

"Shore will," said the kid.

Promised Nellie he'd go. Somehow it made a bond between them which the kid would never break. He was going because Nellie made him promise. And he was going to hunt down the killer because it was Nellie's old pappy he had shot. Nellie knew he would. Never told her so, but there are some things you don't have to tell. She knew it just as well as if he had told her so.

The kid rode along the ridge to a point where the slope was less steep and sent Pecos scrambling up through the brush to the top.

IV

INSOLENCE leered up at the kid from every boot mark behind the tilted slabs of rock. The killer had not even tried to scuff out his tracks with a sidewise drag of the foot. Like waiting to get a standing shot at a deer—or a rabbit, more like. Wait for the rabbit to hop out of his burrow, then pop him over. No need to be scared of leaving a track or two, shooting a rabbit at his burrow. No need to be scared of tracks when you're shooting a nester before his own door, either. Ride back to the Poole and draw your wages and clean your rifle for the next job. A killer doesn't care if a nester comes prowling around looking for a sign. Let him come over to the Poole and look. These tracks could be matched up over there, more than likely.

But that doesn't put the life back in Nellie's old gray headed pappy. Matching tracks can't put the life back in a man, but it shore might help to keep life in the next one. Smash this killer's knuckles with a bullet, and he won't tromp around behind another bunch of rocks so free and careless, waiting to shoot some old man that steps outside his door.

The kid's eyes went seeking here and there. Killer as careless as this—and as sure of Poole protection—'pears like he might leave some sign more than boot tracks. 'Pears like he might give himself away so a feller'd know who to go looking for over at the Poole. All those men waiting under the cottonwood—the kid wished now that he had paid more attention to their feet that day. Wasn't boots he was watching from the tail of his eyes, though. Faces and gun hands—they were what he had wanted to kinda keep an eye on. Wasn't a face there or a voice that he wouldn't know five years from now, but the feet and the tracks they made—that was another matter.

Been smoking up here, too. The kid stopped and picked up a cigaret stub, stared at it frowningly and threw it away. Any man in the country might have made that cigaret for himself. The kid himself might have, so far as that went. He took a step or two and picked up something else; a cartridge—.30-30 Winchester. That didn't tell much, either. All Poole riders toted Winchester rifles, and so far as the kid had noticed they were all of the same caliber. His was. So was Babe's. So was the gun Nate Wheeler had in his saddle scabbard. Reckon two-thirds of the rifles in the country were .30-30 Winchesters. Made it safer in your killings, having a gun like all the rest.

Not much time left for prowling around. Nesters would be coming along pretty quick and some of them would shore hurry up here to take a look at the spot where the killer had waited for his chance. Not much gained by coming, either. Boot tracks any man could make, shell out of a rifle any man might carry. Reckon there'd be horse tracks, too, down off the ridge somewhere close by. Reckon it would be plumb crazy-like to stay and see Nellie when she came riding back thataway. Shore was a pretty rider . . .

The kid's thoughts halted as abruptly as his body. Even his heart stopped dead still in his chest; or at least it felt as if it had. The blood froze in his veins so that his face had a pinched, old look. He bent stiffly and with a slow reluctance utterly unlike himself, and picked here, there, over here another, and he stood up looking at something in the palm of his hand.

Three pieces of broken match. Two pieces fitting together—match snapped in the fingers and dropped. One piece of another match. Babe—Babe Garner. Shot Nate Wheeler from the side hill over there, first day the kid ever saw the damned valley. Shot to save a plumb stranger, so it looked. Shot same time the kid shot. Babe. Poole killer, holed up over in Cold Spring cabin, making out like he was just riding line; keeping cases on the nesters to see they didn't pull off any dirty work. Making out like he was just watching the rim. Making out hell!

Bushwhacking nesters from behind rocks, that's what he was doing. Playing the kid for a sucker. Lay on the bunk reading story books all evening—hell! Lay there planning how he'd go out next morning and dry gulch some poah devil of a nester, that's what. Nice and accommodating—"How'll you have your aigs this mornin', Tiger Eye?" Smiling. "Take care o' yourself, Tiger Eye!" Babe. Up here cached behind these rocks, smoking a cigaret and waiting for Nellie's old gray headed pappy to come limping out his door. Draw a bead on that little old man's back and pull the trigger, and watch him kick his last, then ride off bold as you please. Ride back to camp a-smiling—"What kinda day you have, Tiger Eye? Anybody jump you or anything?" Fry potatoes and onions and cuss because the onions made his eyes water, and laugh because it looked like he was crying. No tears for Nellie's old pappy, though. "Pour your coffee now, Tiger Eye? Come and git it, kid, while it's hot!" Hell and damnation—*Babe!*

Pecos had to use his horse sense and take the full responsibility of getting back up on Big Bench, for the kid just climbed into the saddle, his foot fumbling like a drunken man's for the stirrup, and rode unseeingly away from that hellish spot where he had seen the fair face of friendship blacken and shrink to a grinning death's head before him.

He ought to have known, that first day. He ought to have seen that Babe Garner had fired that rifle shot not to save the kid's life but because he wanted to make certain Nate Wheeler was dead. Because he had meant to kill Wheeler, had waited behind some rock there on the side hill until Wheeler came along. Plumb simple. The kid must be losing all the sense he was born with, not to have seen it. Went and thanked Babe for saving his life—loved him for it—like a damn' fool. Babe laughed up his sleeve and took the thanks, and never explained he was only making shore of the job.

Up on the Bench there the other day, riding over to talk to Jess Markel. Babe lied and the kid knew he lied, and then he had to go and swallow what Babe told him about that talk. Babe more'n likely told Jess all about Tiger Eye Reeves and helped Jess plan how he could get him. Damn' fool! Let Babe lie him blind. A cold blooded killer like that.

Kill the kid some of these days, more'n likely. Shore would, if the Poole ever took a notion it would be worth their while to pay Babe for the job. "Have another cup of coffee, Tiger Eye—" in that damnable, lying, friendly tone of voice that would make a feller think he'd go through hell and high water for you! "Better come to bed, Tiger Eye; we got t' roll out early in the mornin'." And wait till he got to sleep before he put a bullet through his head—and ride over and collect from the Poole! Or wait till the kid started off to the spring for a bucket of water, and sneak along behind and get him in the back with his rifle, and make the claim some nester had come up there bushwhacking Poole riders. Babe. Babe was that kind of a skunk.

IF YOUTH has heights of loyalty and love and blind hero worship, youth also has depths of disillusionment and implacable judgments not to be plumbed by one who has lived and suffered and learned the lesson of tolerance. The kid's body held the rhythm of the leisurely pace which Pecos always took when his master was deep in his day dreaming. His body held the old rhythm, but his soul tore at its breast and gazed in horror at the devastation wrought by three pieces of broken match. He carried them clenched in his left hand, and twice on that ride he lifted his fingers and looked at the telltale fragments. Once, in a surge of sudden and overwhelming incredulity which chilled again to conviction. Again, when he remembered the look on Babe's face as he stood outside the Poole mess house, watching Jess Markel go by with his bandaged hands.

Babe had lighted a cigaret. He snapped the match in two—like these pieces, here in the kid's palm—and looked at the kid and said he'd rather be dead than crippled like that. And—the kid swallowed a lump in his throat that was there aching just the same afterward—and the kid had told Babe *he* wasn't a killer. And all the while Babe was a killer, and that's why he had shivered when he looked at Jess's hands. Babe was a killer for the money there was in it, and if his hands were crippled he'd lose his job of bushwhacking nesters. Dry gulching them.

Babe would shore hate it, having his hands busted with bullets. Babe would rather be dead than have that happen to him. The kid's clenched hand rested on the saddle horn and his head was bowed, his cleft chin resting on the soft folds of his silk neckerchief. The kid's eyes were looking at the grass and flowers and the little bright pebbles and patches of sand where Pecos would set his deliberate, daintily assured feet, but what he saw was Babe, in a new and terrible guise.

He was seeing Babe by the kitchen table, looking down at his shattered knuckles, and he was hearing Babe say, "Put a bullet through my damn' brain, Tiger Eye! I'd rather be dead than like this." He was seeing Babe crumpled down between the table and the stove, lying on his side, kind of, because he had tried to hang on to the table and so had fallen slantwise. He was seeing a bullet hole turning bluish in Babe's forehead, just about where the lock of hair always fell, that he kept pushing back with a swipe of his hand when he talked. His left hand—the kid had always noticed that Babe never pushed back that lock with his right hand. Always rolled a cigaret with his left hand, too. One handed roll. Not many men bothered to learn it. Killer's tricks. Damn' fool that he hadn't guessed it before. Come all the way up from Texas to get away from killers and from the impending necessity of killing—and here he was, living with the lowest snake of 'em all. Eating and washing dishes and playing cards and sleeping in the same bed with one.

The kid laughed with a harsh abruptness that made Pecos snort and duck sidewise, squatting under the saddle as if something had fallen on him from the clouds. The kid started and looked around like one suddenly awakened from a nightmare. He was on the last slope of the ridge running up to the tiny walled in basin where Babe's cabin stood snugly sheltered against a split peak, a spring at one side, a stable and corral on beyond. Beyond the corral, the pasture where extra horses might be left to graze.

As if he had never seen the place before, the kid stared at the snug retreat. The cabin with its stovepipe braced four ways with haywire, the top joint standing at a rakish tilt where a gust of wind had left off shaking it. Smoke trailing a blue gray ribbon that kinked in the breeze. Babe was home, getting supper ready for the kid when he came. Beat it on ahead, took some short cut that he knew. The kid had not seen him; but, then, the kid had not seen anything on that ride.

He gave himself a little shake, snapped back to clear and pitiless thinking. He lifted his head, pursed his stiffened lips and whistled the signal of all Poole riders. Babe pulled open the door and stood there grinning as the kid rode up. The kid grinned back at Babe; but his eyes gave their warning, for his blue left eye was squinting and the amber right eye was opened full and had the baleful stare of a tiger stalking his kill.

"Well, you made it ahead of the storm," Babe called cheerfully as the kid swung down at the door. "'Fraid you might get caught out, Tiger Eye. Rip snorter, when it gits here."

The kid turned and looked where a greenish black cloud mass came coiling up from the southwest. Plumb strange that he hadn't noticed that storm a-coming. Hadn't heard the growl and mutter of thunder, either. Didn't know but just that Babe was a paid killer for the Poole and had shot Nellie's little gray headed old pappy in the back.

"Shore right smaht of a stawm, Babe." And he walked to the door.

"Better pull the saddle while I dish up, hadn't you? I'll make the gravy."

The kid brushed past him and went inside, turning to face Babe.

"What's the matter, Tiger Eye? Anything happen?"

"Yes, suh. Right smaht happened, Babe."

"You look sick. Had a run-in with the nesters?"

"A nestah got killed."

Babe's cold gray eyes scrutinized the kid. He closed the door against a puff of wind, leaned his back against it, his thumbs hooked inside his cartridge belt. The kid's vivid picture of him revised itself in certain details with pitiless accuracy. Babe would not fall between the stove and table. He would topple over toward the bunk, more'n likely.

"You don't want to let that get you, Tiger Eye. You done right. They've got it in for Poole riders, and he'd 'a' got you if—"

"No he wouldn't, Babe."

"Who was it, d'you know? Or maybe you ain't tellin'."

"I know—and I'm tellin' you' all. It was old pappy Murray."

"Old Mur—" Babe's eyes flicked open while he stared at the kid.

"Old pappy Murray, shot in the back."

"Hunh. Well—" Babe hesitated—"he's a nester and a cow thief. He had it comin', Tiger Eye."

"He nevah had it comin' in front of his own doah. The killah cached himse'f behind a ledge up on the hill. Left his boot tracks theah—and a rifle shell."

"Yeah? Well—"

"Left anotha sign, Babe." The kid's voice was soft, but nevertheless it sounded implacable.

"Yeah? What sign's that?"

"Left this, Babe." He opened his palm.

Babe looked, lifted his glance to the bleak face of the kid, and to that tiger stare of the yellow right eye. Babe's teeth caught at his underlip. His fingers quivered—but they did not go for his gun. They did not dare.

INTERRUPTION came. The shrill, whistled signal all Poole riders knew. Babe's eyes searched the kid's face. He turned his back, pulled open the door, answered the call.

"Supper ready, Babe?" The Poole foreman owned that voice.

He swung down at the door, laughing that he had ridden hell out of his horse to beat the storm to Cold Spring. Beginning to sprinkle—five minutes and she'd be on top of them howling like a wolf.

"I'll go put up my hoss, Babe, while yo' make the gravy."

The kid spoke at Babe's shoulder and Babe jumped as if he had been struck.

Shoot him in the back, more'n likely, but not while the foreman was there. Foreman seemed a straight, honest man—too straight and honest for the Poole, the kid thought savagely. Nothing would happen while he was there. Flag of truce.

Babe was stirring gravy in the frying pan when he went into the cabin, stirring with his right hand. Shore, why not? Cards lay as they fell till the foreman left again. Meant to go, all right. Didn't unsaddle his horse—meant to ride on to the Poole soon as he had his supper and the storm was over. Straight, honest man, name of Joe Hale. No killer look about him; his mind went to cattle and calf tally and shipment of beef. Asked about the nesters, about the cattle over this way, and whether they gave much trouble wanting to drift into the valley. Said he was trying to get the Old Man—that was Walter Bell—to have the company try to buy up all the ranches down in the valley. That would stop the trouble, he thought. Buy out the nesters and have all that valley for the Poole. Make great winter range.

The foreman talked while he ate largely of the supper Babe had cooked. Babe talked too, but not very much. He let the foreman have the floor. Babe didn't eat much, either. Seemed to have lost his appetite. Kept his eyes on his plate most of the time. Looked at his plate, but kept sending sly sidelong glances at the kid, too. Reckon he thought Tiger Eye wouldn't see and read the meaning. Knew damn' well he was trapped. Knew he'd have to face it, soon as Joe Hale was gone. Shore storming. So dark inside the kid got up and lighted the lamp.

Afterward he stood there looking down at the two who still sat at the table; Joe talking away, Babe pretending to listen but poignantly aware of every move the kid made, almost of every breath he drew. The kid knew it. Knew it as a tiger must know what quivers the flesh of the trembling buck as he pounces; knew as a cat knows what palpitates the side of the mouse between its paws. It was not the kid's doing, this interval of waiting. He didn't like it. He listened to the receding reverberations of the thunder, saw the lightening of the sky through the window, knew that the late sun would be out in a little while. Then the foreman would go loping across the drenched prairie and he and Babe would have their settlement.

The foreman emptied his third cup of coffee, wiped his mustache with his handkerchief, hitched the box seat two inches back and drew his tobacco and papers from his pocket. Soon as he had his smoke going he would get up and leave. Already he was sending toward the window a calculating glance, mentally noting how the steady downpour had suddenly lessened to a thin drizzle made shining by the sun's rays. Now he was sifting tobacco into the tiny white trough, now he was rolling it. He would get up in a minute and reach for his hat.

The kid backed to the bunk and stood leaning against the wall at its head. Babe wasn't smoking, right then. The kid reckoned Babe must know it would be his last smoke on earth, and he wasn't hankering for it. The foreman reached thumb and finger in the watch pocket of his vest, groped there, taking his time. Talking about a bog hole that had caught one of the Poole's best bulls and held him mired over night. Didn't know but what they'd lose him after all, because he seemed to have wrenched his back somehow when the boys sank their loops on him and drug him out. Couldn't get up. Had to be tailed up, and then soon as he laid down he was helpless again.

The kid listened mechanically, watching the unlighted cigaret wabbling between the foreman's hairy lips. Hell, wouldn't he ever get going? Was he aiming to set there all night and gab about mired bulls? That was like Babe. Babe was mired, too; mired in his own killings. Down and helpless, and he knew it. And suddenly the kid knew what he was going to do, because he had loved Babe and believed in him. He was going to let Babe draw. He'd give him that much of a start. Maybe they'd both go together. The kid wouldn't care if they did. Babe didn't know it and he was chewing his lip right now, thinking the kid was going to kill him. He'd feel better if he knew he was going to have his chance to shoot.

The foreman finally drew a match from his pocket, looked at it, used it with little stabbing motions in the air to point his meaning while he talked to Babe. Gosh, did he always talk thataway? It seemed to the kid that half an hour passed before the cigaret was finally lighted.

The foreman absently blew out the match, snapped it in two, dropped the pieces on the floor and got up, reaching for his hat. Babe lifted his head and looked full at the kid. He saw the kid's lips loosen, saw them quiver as the kid's eyes met his with shamed understanding.

The kid sat down on the bunk, his arms resting on his knees and his face bent to the floor. Babe. He would have shot Babe just on the strength of a broken match. If the foreman hadn't come right when he did, he'd have killed Babe Garner —the best friend he ever had in his life.

The foreman spoke to him, got a mumbled reply and went out. Babe went over and took down the dishpan and set it on the stove, dipping water into it from the bucket standing on the bench. He opened the firebox, thrust in a stick of wood, pushed the door shut with his foot. Babe. Clearing the table, scraping the plates just as if nothing had happened. Stopping now to make himself a cigaret while the kid watched him from under his long eyelashes.

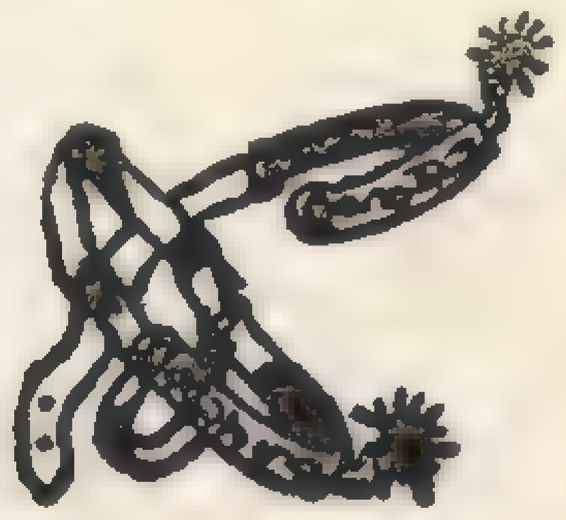
"That feller that shot old Murray down in the valley—you say he left broken match stubs where he waited, Tiger Eye? Can't go much by that. Lots of fellers in a grass country break their match stubs in two before they throw 'em away. Less danger of fire."

"Shore seems a right common habit, Babe," the kid said softly, and got up and went outside.

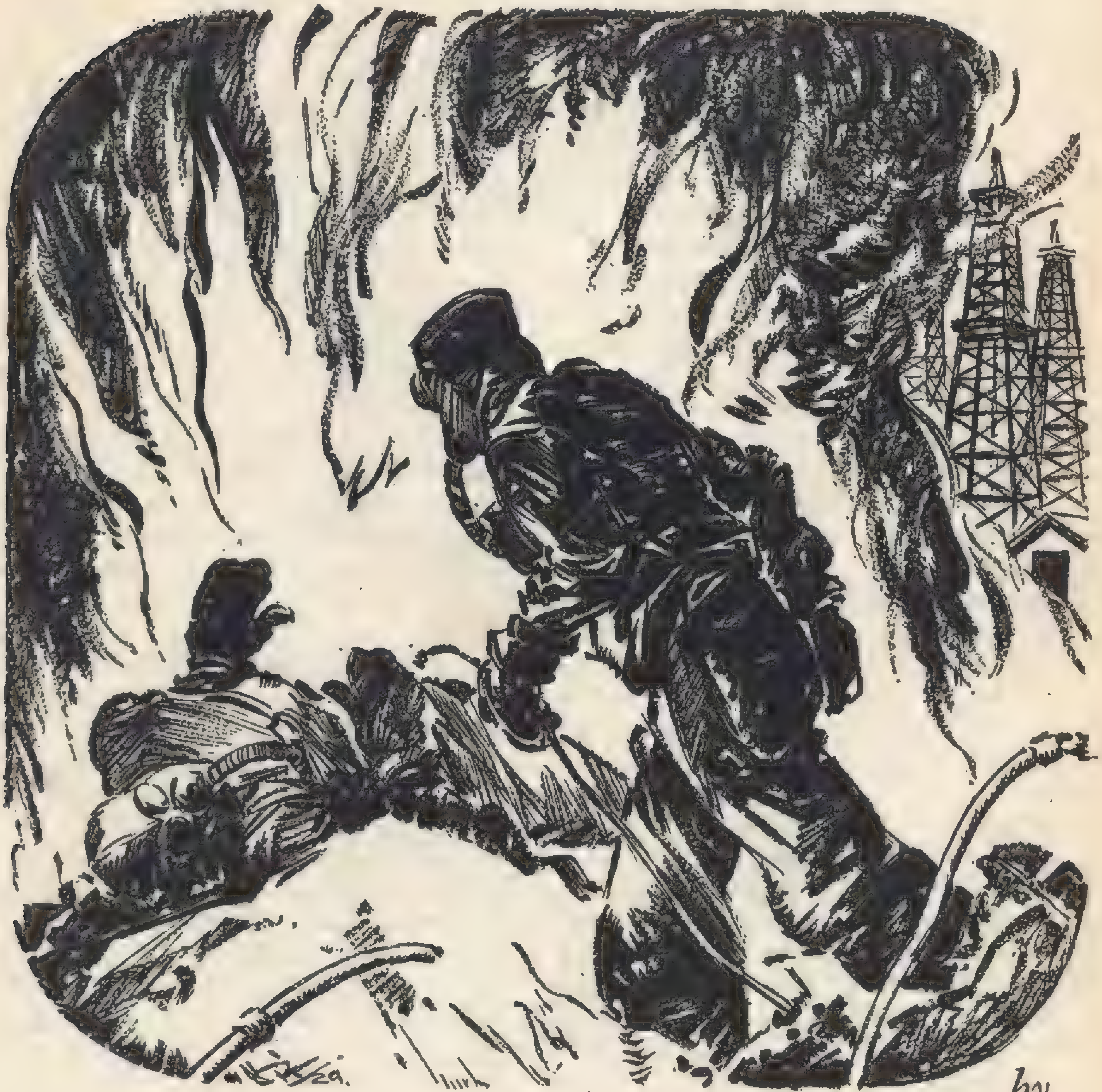
"Say, Tiger Eye, feed my horse too, will you?"

"Shore will, Babe."

The kid's voice was husky with unshed tears.



A Story of the Texas Gushers



by

HELL QUENCHERS

FOSTER-HARRIS

UNEXPECTEDLY the giant truck reeled to the left across the narrow road. There was the wild screaming of a siren, the thundering roar of an accelerated motor, and suddenly a long, low automobile shot from behind to flick around the left of the truck, miss collision by an inch, jolt back into the ruts and leap away. With a curse the truck driver heaved crazily at his wheel, trying to throw his ponderous vehicle back to the middle of the road again. Clearly, right under the nose of his behemoth, he had seen the great black lettered words on the side of the flying red car—NITROGLYCERIN—DANGER.

A shooter in a nitro truck, uncrowned king of all oil country roads, had missed smashing into a load of ten-inch casing by a finger's breadth.

Jimmy Jamison, veteran shooter, riding beside Tex Shackelford, driver of the flying nitro truck, turned in his seat, his blue eyes chill and cold, looked at his companion, opened his mouth, then closed it again without a word.

"Son of a gun like to run me off the road," complained Tex airily. "Bet you I stunted his growth when I cut back on him."

His companion said nothing, looking at the speedometer, quivering between forty-five and fifty miles an hour. There were two hundred and forty quarts of nitroglycerin in the special built safety box behind; pure liquid nitro, enough to destroy a city, deadly and touchy as a giant rattler—and the oil field road beneath the whirling wheels was damp, slick in spots and rough as a detour in hell.

A cold gray crept into the blue of the old shooter's eyes, a danger signal and a warning. For six weeks and more now Tex Shackelford, his partner, had been getting increasingly on Jamison's nerves. The slow, swelling tide of wrath within him, dammed and held back by incredible patience, was straining against its bonds.

There are things you just do not do in the oil country, if you are wise. You do not smoke in the gas territory. You do not try to run ten-ton trucks off the road. You do not drive a nitro truck like a fire wagon going to a three alarm blaze. You do not load a hole with nitro as if you were dropping the old oaken bucket into its green, mossy well. And, crime of crimes, you do not get just so darn expert you are plain damn' careless.

Tex Shackelford had been doing all those things—ever since the wild rush of shooting work had started as the big Ringland oil field, flush and booming, had hit the first peak, dropped off a bit and then gone into the crazy rush of completing that would climax only when the rocketing production hit the all-time peak, then dropped swiftly away in a long downward curve on the output graphs as the giant field subsided into settled production.

Giant shots of nitro these Ringland oil wells required, three and four and five hundred and, in some instances, as much as one thousand quarts, detonated at one time in one well. And the yegg, blowing the door from a heavy safe, uses a spoonful or so of the same deadly soup. As in the Panhandle up north, in the Ringland area there was a granite wash oil pay and a lime pay, both of which in most cases produced heavily only when shattered by tremendous explosions. The big wells were completing now, not by ones and twos every week, but by threes and fours every day; and the calls for shooters were working the few available nitro men to death.

"The gray eagle of all oil well shooters," an enthusiastic oil news writer had called Jamison in one of his dispatches, and the name, singularly appropriate, had stuck. A veteran—significant that, in the trade of playing with liquid death—he had lived in a game where others ended in a thundering roar, by unremitting caution. Two kinds of men he hated and feared—cowards and the too expert; and the latter kind he considered by far the more dangerous.

They were burning hundreds, thousands of quarts of nitro a month now as the field rushed tumultuously on toward that ultimate peak; driving hundreds of miles over the terrifically pounded, rutted oil field highways, shooting, shooting, shooting in a hopeless attempt to keep up with the piling mass of rush orders. And say what you will about safety boxes, safety precautions, time bombs, eliminated dangers, still you find no insurance companies removing their prohibitive rates on shooters.

And with death at your back, death in your hands; death from fire, from collision, from faulty fuses, from improperly washed nitro; from the thousand and one little things that may happen, instant and horrible, there is that slow draining at the nerves that drives toward sudden, insane wrath.

Jamison, the gray eagle of the shooting game, had all but reached the breaking point. And Tex Shackelford, his young partner, carelessly over-expert, was providing the match to set off the powder.

THE DRILLING crew had discreetly retired when they reached the Magnus Petroleum Company No. 101-A-267, to be shot in the lime pay with two hundred and forty quarts. The casing in the big well had been raised several hundred feet to get it out of the zone of shot damage; and a water sand, thus uncovered somewhere above the pay, had partially filled the hole with water.

From somewhere down in those subterranean depths, twenty-nine hundred feet down, the big test was making gas—uneasy puffs that came at ragged intervals like the exhaust blasts of a gasoline engine, attaining a head beneath the pressure of the water in the hole, breaking through and popping out of the mouth of the casing in puffs of blue fumes.

Oil wells are shot with nitroglycerin filled shells—long, cylindrical, tin affairs, filled at the mouth of the well from ten quart cans carried to the scene in the nitro truck, lowered into place by a strong tarred line on a special reel, also carried by the truck. Tin tubing of a smaller diameter is attached to the bottom of the first torpedo when it is lowered into the hole, to reach the bottom and support the nitro filled shells at the desired level, so that the effect is much as if a gigantic skyrocket, resting on its long stick, has been placed. Then the tremendous charge is detonated by time bombs, by squibs or go-devils or by electricity.

In the Ringland field they were using squibs, or small bombs with waterproof fuses, the squib simply being lighted and dropped in.

Working with the deft expertness of long experience, the gray eagle and Tex had placed two torpedoes in the well. The puffs of gas were increasing, and Jamison, fully aware of the danger, could feel the slow crawling of his nerves that came when the deadly moments of his trade arrived.

Tex Shackelford was running the reel, lowering the torpedoes into the hole, and as is usual in such work, he was using the power from the engine of the well to hoist the line. Twice now in one-two order he had done something that Jamison had warned him repeatedly in the six months they had been together to avoid. He had reeled the line all the way in with the engine.

There was a hook on the end of the line that was, of course, supposed to disengage itself from the bail of the torpedo once the deadly thing had been landed, but there had been times when it failed to do so. And there had been times, also, when a too expert shooter, reeling in with the engine, had been blasted into instant eternity by a great torpedo, rocketing up on the end of that line racing out of the hole, smashing into the block overhead before the too expert shooter could stop the engine.

But now the line for the instant hung idle and unweighted. Tex Shackelford had gone out to the truck for another empty tin shell. Jamison had just come back to the mouth of the hole with two buckets of the water with which each torpedo is washed down before it is lowered into the well.

The well gave a sudden choking cough, spewing up a mass of reeking blue gas. Then the black hole retched and with a belching roar of gas vomited forth a long, shining tin torpedo, filled to the brim with nitro. It popped up out of the hole into the derrick like a pip flying from a squeezed orange.

With a yell the gray eagle leaped to catch it before it fell back, struck and exploded. At the edge of the derrick his partner, Tex Shackelford, returning from the truck with the empty shell, froze for a lightning instant, paralyzed with horror. The flashing torpedo coming up out of the hole, hesitating two or three feet clear of the casinghead and then dropping back toward Jamison's frantic arms, was recorded in his brain with all that clarity of detail with which men are said to see just before they die.

The gray eagle's flying hands snatched at the torpedo in mid-air, caught it and he stumbled. The well was retching and vomiting as though in intolerable agony, blue gas shooting out in a shining stream. With sudden intuition of what was coming, Tex Shackelford burst the bonds of his paralysis and tried to make the distance from where he stood to the mouth of the belching casing in one mad leap. His foot caught on a drill bit and he pitched sidewise, clear out of the derrick on to the ground, twisting in air as he hurtled down so that he fell on hands and knees, facing outward. And at the same instant, with a groaning roar the well vomited forth the second shell, clear up and out into the derrick.

IN SUCH instants the mettle of men is shown. Jamison, the gray eagle, at the mouth of the well with one long, unwieldy torpedo already in his hands, had stumbled, missing dropping the deadly thing by a miracle. As he stumbled, up came the second torpedo. And how he did it the gray eagle himself could never tell. In some superhuman way he set that first torpedo safely down, turned and caught the second torpedo just before it could fall back against the iron of the casinghead, a fall that would have blasted shooters, derrick, equipment and all into smoking, tangled shreds.

With the second torpedo in his arms, the gray eagle turned—and there was his partner, Tex Shackelford, scrambling on his hands and knees, clear outside the derrick, exactly as if in hysterical fright he had plunged outward for his own safety.

The tide of wrath and scorn within the old shooter burst its bonds in one terrific deluge as the revulsion of feeling at the danger just past came. He set the torpedo gently down, straightened to his full gaunt height and his blue eyes blazed with a terrible anger.

"You coward," he said hoarsely. "You damned, dirty coward!"

His foot on the edge of the derrick floor, Tex Shackelford was staring at him, his face flushed. Twice he opened his mouth and closed it again. Then:

"I—I stumbled, Jimmy," he said lamely. "I jumped to grab it and I tripped and fell clear out of the derrick."

Jamison looked at him. His blue eyes were speaking more terribly than words. They indicted, convicted, damned and blasted the younger man with a furious intensity beyond all possible speech. Missing trucks with a nitro carrier by bare inches. Juggling ten quart cans of nitro. Reeling all the way with the engine. Too expert—and a coward. A dirty coward. The verdict was there past all appeal.

"Get somebody to take you in," said the gray eagle hoarsely. "Tell the company to transfer you, or quit. I'll see you in hell before I work with you again."

Burning anger showed in the eyes of the younger man and his jaw shut with a grim click.

"All right, Jamison," he said evenly. "If you feel that way, I'll see you in hell."

He turned and walked steadily away toward the distant clump of parked cars of the drilling crew and other Magnus men, rage burning within him. Yet, curiously, somewhere inside his mind, there was a cold, inhuman calm.

The bull headed old fool! Calling a man a dirty coward, giving him no chance to explain. And in the back of his mind, in that strange, inhuman calm, the cold voice justifying the gray eagle.

Too expert—careless. That was the gray eagle's grievance against his partner. Right, too. Absolutely right. He certainly had been rubbing the gray eagle right down to the raw. Over weeks and weeks; months, in fact. Doing everything that the canny wisdom of the gray eagle avoided, detested. No wonder he boiled over. He did not really think Tex a coward. But too expert, careless, a fool, the worst kind of danger.

And back in the derrick, old Jamison moved the deadly shells to a safer resting place, sat down, held up his hand to stare at the fingers. They were not trembling. Too schooled for that. But his nerves were crawling, jumping. He reached into his pocket, bit savagely on the corner of a gnawed plug of navy cut.

Why had he busted open that way? Young Tex certainly wasn't a coward. Wouldn't have been in the shooting game if he had been. Too expert, careless—yes. But young. And eager and friendly and a nice guy. Impulsive. Young. Why should he be as smart and cautious as an old head when he wasn't half as old? Needed an old head to bring him along. Makings of a great shooter, a king pin nitro man in that kid. Brains enough to get over being too expert. Dumb, like any young pup, but likable. What a sap stunt to run him off that way. Could have raised cain with him and made him appreciate it. Taught him something instead of making him mad. What a fool trick to get mad over something young Tex hadn't caused and couldn't have helped happening.

Old Jamison raised his head. Young Tex Shackelford was just reaching the parked cars of the oil workers. The gray eagle half rose from his seat, then settled back, staring regretfully after him.

TEX SHACKELFORD was gone. After a long while the gray eagle, true to the traditions of his game, called in the Magnus drilling superintendent to see whether something could not be done to put a damper on that gas, then went steadily on with preparations to shoot the well.

Three hours delayed, he shot the well and in she came, a gusher, to bridge—that is, clog up with shot débris—almost immediately. But the drilling crew could easily enough knock out that bridge and clean the hole. Jamison had shot his well. He carefully placed the empty nitro cans back in the truck, for nitro cans as well as being copper and expensive, are dangerous and explosive all by themselves.

A hard, silent man. It was seldom that he humbled himself, apologized to any one for anything. Take it or leave it was the gray eagle's imperial philosophy in his dealings with other men. It would be hard. But he was going to explain somehow to young Tex Shackelford that he had not meant to be as nasty as he had sounded. He liked Tex and knew that Tex was no coward. Tex was just too damned expert.

Young Tex Shackelford was gone. Jack Gleeson, who held down the Ringland station office for Consolidated-American Nitro and Torpedo Company while the gray eagle did the work, explained as much two minutes after the gray eagle arrived.

"Shackelford? He's gone to Southwest Texas," Long Jack answered in reply to the gray eagle's first question, as the shooter stepped from the nitro truck in the garage behind the office. "He called the G. M. long distance the minute he got back here and the G. M. switched him. Chuck Dawson's coming up to take his place."

Face impassive, the gray eagle nodded. Old O. K. Curtis, general manager of Consolidated-American, up in the Tulsa headquarters offices, was a canny wizard at handling and judging men. He would not turn loose a good man like Shackelford. But discord between two members of a shooting team at the same station—well, discord and dynamite do not mix. Chuck Dawson, coming up, would never worry anybody by becoming too expert. He did not have sense enough. A good enough man in his way, but stolid, sheep-like, exasperating because of his very calm. A bad sort of man to be in the shooting game because he did not have imagination enough to appreciate its dangers.

Long Jack was asking no questions, but his face was bespeaking his curiosity. Young Tex Shackelford had told him practically nothing, and this Jamison was a hard boiled old bird, the kind you did not ask personal questions. Fiercely independent, proud and explosive as his own nitro.

"Shackelford leave any word?" asked Jamison bruskly.

Long Jack tugged nervously at the stiff white collar, the badge of rank that marked him as a grade apart from the workers of the tremendous field.

"Well," he admitted cautiously, "he did say the next time he saw you he hoped it would be in hell."

The gray eagle looked at the office man with scornful eyes, turned and walked out of the building without another word, abandoning his truck to the subordinates. So Shackelford had still been mad enough to repeat that when he came in. Well—A whiff of the fumes from the nitro the gray eagle had burned in the Magnus well had given him a splitting headache. He reached abstractedly for his gnawed plug of navy cut. If young Tex had been in the station when he came back he might have straightened things out. But gone. And leaving word he hoped to see the gray eagle next in hell. With a harsh laugh the gray eagle shook his head and held up his hand between himself and the light, staring at his tensed fingers. They did not tremble. Too schooled for that. But along the nerves it seemed that something clammy, maddening, was crawling.

The Ringland field swung toward the peak in the wild rush of a great flush, drills pounding night and day. And as she peaked and dropped, Jamison, the gray eagle, felt the crawling tension in his nerves ease slowly away. There would still be plenty of work, plenty of wells completing, plenty of shooting for months, even a year or so to come. But the mad rush was over.

As the work slowed and he had more time, even after Chuck Dawson had been reassigned elsewhere, the gray eagle began to make cautious inquiries about Tex Shackelford. Shackelford was stationed in the Mid-American district now, he found, chief and only shooter for Consolidated-American in that small but lively sector, and doing nicely. The operators seemed to like him a whole lot, wandering oil scouts to whom Jamison talked revealed. And, startlingly, from Biff Thompson, big company scout:

"Yeah, the boys like him fine. One thing about that baby, he's sure thorough and careful. Don't leave nothing to chance, that's Tex. You got a good man, there."

The gray eagle could hardly believe his ears. Tex Shackelford thorough and careful! Well, why not? The boy certainly had sense enough. The gray eagle shook his head. Some day he would see young Tex again. Maybe get right with him once more. He had thousands of acquaintances and hundreds of casual friends, the gray eagle, but not one intimate. And in his shy, proud way, beneath his iron exterior, he did wish he could have one real friend. A likable young fellow, like Tex. Abstractedly he held up his hand, staring at the extended, tensed fingers.

IN THE middle of the night, routing the gray eagle from his sleep after a hard day's work, it came. Urgent wires to the Consolidated-American headquarters in Tulsa. Wires humming with orders from Tulsa to Ringland, to Jamison, gray eagle of all Consolidated-American shooters. Rush. Rush. Flores Exploration Company No. 1 Appleby in the Cross field burning, cratering. Will ruin whole field unless stopped at once. Best shooter we've got needed. Jamison, you take all necessary nitro and equipment and get there *pronto*. Start at once. Wire. Damn expense. Curtis.

In an hour Jamison had started. A hundred quarts of nitro in the big safety box behind. The squat, firefighting torpedo shells, of his own design, in the racks. The asbestos firefighting armor, the electric batteries, the wiring, the detonators —all ready. Another truck, with more equipment and men, a hastily aroused nitro relay driver at the wheel, coming behind. On south from the isolated

Consolidated-American's Ringland station with its nitro packed magazine, south through the lights and flares of the big Ringland field, south and east into the vast, velvet darkness of Texas night. Somewhere far south a man-made volcano, an oil field tragedy was thundering flame far upward into the black sky. And Jamison, the gray eagle, dean of all Consolidated-American's crack well shooters and oil well fire fighters, was coming.

At dawn he arrived. The flustered officials of the little Flores Exploration Company met him at Wayland, twenty miles from the Cross field, all but hysterical in the worry of their predicament, and pathetically cheerful over his arrival. The well had cratered. It was pouring out all the gas in the field in tremendous billows of flame. The district supervisor and his deputies of the Texas Railroad Commission were camping on their doorsteps, shouting murder. Something had to be done and done immediately.

Impassive, placid, inspiring confidence by his mere presence, Jamison quieted the shrieking little men, waved them into their cars to lead the way to the field. He needed no explanations, no descriptions as to the why of all this hubbub and hysteria. The two members of the drilling crew who had died when the Flores No. 1 had burst into flame would not be brought back to life if he put it out. Probably the well itself, expensive as it was, could not be rehabilitated and completed as a profitable producer after the fire was out. What the row was about, what the State supervisors, the Flores officials, all the producers in the Cross field were worried about was that that cratering well was pulling all the gas pressure off the field.

The field was producing, the scores of good wells were flowing thousands upon thousands of barrels of profitable oil because the heavy pressure of the gas imprisoned in the same sand with the oil was forcing that oil to flow out into the wells very much as carbonic gas makes a seltzer bottle squirt. Take the gas out and the oil would not flow into those wells. It might, a little, but nowhere near as fast as it would if the gas were left in there. And if the gas were released, the loss in the Cross field, from wells which would have to be pumped instead of flowing by themselves, would amount to millions of dollars.

In the gray morning they arrived on the lease where the Flores No. 1 was burning. It had been afire now for three days. Beginning with a blast which had swept the two members of the drilling crew into eternity, and set it to blazing, the Flores No. 1 had torn out for itself a volcano-like crater, thirty or forty yards across at the top and extending—narrowing to the size of the original drill hole at the bottom, of course—clear down to the producing sand at twelve hundred and forty-two feet.

A seething, roaring sea of flame, filling the whole ragged hole, was pouring up out of the mouth of the crater, leaping high into the air in rolling clouds of felt-like, roily smoke. The crater had long since swallowed all remnants of the derrick and drilling machinery.

A thin, wide ring of spectators, many of whom had obviously been there all through the night, gaped at this terrific manifestation of the forces of nature running wild, and felt the crisping heat from positions many hundred yards back.

A bronzed, clear eyed man, Shelby Underwood, deputy supervisor for the State oil and gas division, stepped from a car to greet the gray eagle as he swung his red painted truck through the break in the barbed wire into the lease.

"Morning, Jimmy," nodded Underwood casually. "Glad to see you got here. We been needing you."

The gray eagle nodded, staring keenly at the geyser of flame, the batteries of hastily placed boilers, far back, the steam and water lines, the hastily improvised shields with which the Cross field forces had been vainly fighting the monster.

"Been pouring water and steam into her for two days," said the State man quietly, noting the shooter's examination. "Hasn't done a damn' bit of good. You'll have to shoot it out or she'll ruin the field."

The gray eagle looked at him quizzically.

"Yeah?" he asked softly. "How much you think she's making?"

"At a rough guess, between two hundred and three hundred million cubic feet," declared Underwood. "That's ten or twenty times as much as any ordinary well ever made in this field before. And it's a tight sand and there isn't such a hell of a lot of gas in all down below there. You know what that means. When the gas pressure goes off, by-by Cross pool." He made a fluttering motion with his hands.

Abstractedly the gray eagle nodded, studying the cratered well.

"Yeah," he said absently. "Yeah. Wind from the south—coming up. Got water lines into her now, ain't you? Well, we'll try."

He turned, looking back along the road up which he had come. Immediately behind him was the car in which the hysterical little officials of the Flores company had led him out to the lease, and from which they were now calling to him anxiously.

Behind it he could see nothing of the red truck in which his men were coming. Always careful in such matters, the gray eagle, intending to drive fast, had allowed no one to come with him on the truck in which he carried his nitro. He climbed back into his motor, moved it over to one side where it would be in the best position for his purpose, stopped and climbed out to begin his preparations for battle.

As he worked he thought wistfully that it would be nice now to have young Tex by his side, helping. Tex Shackelford wasn't over-expert now, so the scout had said. A fine kid. Jamison had always been lonely, proud, shy. And somehow the fine, warm regard the kid had given him at the start had—well, got under his skin. He shook his head, holding up his fingers, staring at them. Steady as a rock, in spite of that long night drive. He was ready for battle.

A SWARM of spectators already had ringed him round, standing at what they no doubt considered a safe distance from the red truck with its great black warning—NITROGLYCERIN—DANGER. He got out his asbestos armor, the helmet, the overall-like suit, the shoes and gauntlets. Shelby Underwood, the State oil and gas man, came over to help.

"Your other truck's coming, back down the road a piece," informed the State man quietly. "Want to take a look in the crater?"

The gray eagle nodded, discarding his hat, crawling into the cumbersome asbestos suit, beginning to buckle himself in. The excited little Flores officials were dancing about and asking many questions, but to them he paid absolutely no attention. From the road the red truck carrying his crew came toward him, stopping just to the rear. The half dozen men from the Ringland station flocked around him.

"Load a couple of these bombs for me and get the wires and batteries ready, will you, boys?" directed the gray eagle evenly. "I'm going to look at her first. And say, you—" wheeling on the Flores officials—"tell those birds standing around out there that fifty feet don't mean a damned thing to nitro. We've got a hundred quarts in the truck here and she may turn loose."

He put on his helmet, an all-enveloping affair with flaps coming down on chest and back, and twisted the mica eye slit around until he could see properly. Shelby Underwood handed him his gauntlets.

"She's caving some," the voice of the State man warned him. "Be careful about getting too close to the edge, Jimmy, if you don't want a quick trip to hell and no return ticket. Well, luck to you."

A strange figure in his white armor, the gray eagle nodded stiffly and strode awkwardly away, heading toward the crater of flame, swinging his body from side to side as he walked. Fighting oil well fires was an old story to him. Even cratering wells such as this were not new, although they were quite rare. Putting out such tremendous fires was no easy or certain task. There have been wells that took weeks, months of the hardest, most dangerous kind of fighting to master and extinguish, requiring every agency which human ingenuity, skill and money could bring into play.

Despite his heavy armor, he could feel the heat as he approached, intense, crisping. The south wind was carrying the smoke and flames over toward the northern edge of the irregular crater, so it was from the south side that the gray eagle approached, avoiding the deadly fumes, flame and smoke. From the black volumes of the vapor it was evident that the well must be making considerable oil, probably spraying it upward with the gas.

The ground beneath his feet was baked.

He was very near the lip of the crater. There were deep, serrated cracks in the bare smoking earth, and the edge was caving, a little here, a little there, slabs of smoking, baked soil going down into the flaming abyss.

Watching his step, he was at the edge, peering in.

It was a mouth of hell. Hungry, ragged, gaping. Two or three hundred yards straight down toward the bowels of the earth the crater dropped, filled from side to side with seething flame, with rushing blue fumes, with the hiss and roar of the gas. And somewhere below was water, boiling, frothing with the gas tearing upward from its age long imprisonment, steam leaping up with the gas to strike the cooler air at the mouth of the crater and burst into writhing, coiling masses of white, all but lost in the flame and smoke. The brain reeled.

The gray eagle caught a glimpse of some piece of metal from the derrick, far down in the flame, white hot and glowing. There was a sudden hush of the wind, a giant billow of fire licked toward him. He leaped back and a foot wide slice of smoking earth on the brink went sliding down into the crater.

Shaking his head, he swung swiftly and went back toward his truck. Sweat was pouring from every pore of his body and he could tell that against the armor of his suit a terrible heat was smashing, a heat in which no unprotected living thing could survive two minutes. His head was reeling dizzily, but he knew he could stop the fire. It would not be such a hard job after all. Water and nitro, cannily placed—they would turn the trick.

◆

HE WAS back at the truck, pulling off his helmet, gasping hungrily at the sweet cool air, wiping the streaming sweat from his face, clearing his stinging eyes. His crew had filled two of the squat bombs with nitro—twenty quart affairs. They were busy preparing the batteries, the wiring. The gray eagle nodded approvingly and turned to Shelby Underwood.

"I see you got a couple of water lines into her," he commented. "Better get 'em going again."

The State man nodded, went swiftly off toward the boilers. Two days before, under the protection of improvised heat shields, the Flores field workers and details of men from other producing companies in the field had managed to thrust two heavy water pipes and a couple of steam pipes over the edge of the crater, working awkwardly from scores of feet away, shoving the heavy pipe on ahead of the shields like lances on the ground. The red hot, softened ends of these water lines still dangled over the lip of the crater where the ground had caved beneath them, and the giant pumps back there by the battery of boilers, Jamison knew, could again start hurling ton upon ton of water through those lines into the heart of the crater on a few minutes' notice. Indeed, under the command of Underwood, workers around the boilers already were starting the pumps again.

He inspected the first bomb. Of his own design, compact, cunningly sheathed with asbestos and heat resisting material so that it would endure intact for the maximum length of time in terrific flames, easily portable, equipped for electric detonation, the bomb was so constructed as to achieve the very maximum concussion possible from its tremendously explosive contents.

Everything was in readiness. With a wave of his hand the gray eagle led his crew toward the well, two of them carrying the bomb with exaggerated care as if it were some fragile, incredibly rare and precious egg, the others trailing behind with the battery and wiring. At a safe distance from the truck and as close to the crater as convenient and comfortable, the gray eagle halted his men and settled patiently down to wait until the pouring water should show some result. He did not expect much of it. Two days steady fighting with water and steam had had no affect on the flaming chasm. But to cool the smoking sides a bit, to damp that white hot metal below, to reduce the chances for re-ignition once the monster fire was out—the water might do that.

He gave it two hours. Then he took the squat bomb carefully in his arms, nodded his helmet grotesquely at the group around him and started off, the wiring trailing behind him. Significantly, that wiring was not even connected to the firing battery yet. The gray eagle took no unnecessary chances.

Again he reached the southern edge, peered down into the reeling blue heat of the abyss. The metal bomb hugged against his breast grew smoking hot and he could feel it even through the thick asbestos and felt of his gauntlets, his armor. Twenty quarts of liquid death inside, getting hot. Took quite a lot of heat to explode nitro; at least, theoretically, it did. But in the white hot, seething heat of hell? Twenty quarts of nitro hugged against your breast in the heat of hell, getting hotter every second. Deliberately he set his bomb down, on the very edge of the crater, cunningly placing it so that a low, wide mound of sand flung out by the roaring gas might in a measure act as a reflector, hurling the mighty concussion back across the crater. Then he turned and fled.

The crew saw him coming, a grotesque, unearthly figure, his weird white armor blackened and smudged now, his helmet swaying from side to side so that he could see as he ran. They were ready as he came up, tearing the helmet from his streaming face. He nodded and waved his gauntleted hand. A wizened little mechanic in greasy coveralls knelt, swiftly connected the ends of the wiring to the terminals of the battery, turned and bore down on the plungers.

Instantly the air smashed at their ear drums with a sledgehammer concussion. The force of the explosion came like a slap in the face. A bursting cloud of smoke and fire leaped across the crater of the burning well, the giant flame of the gas stove flicked like the flame of a candle in a sudden wind and went out.

The gas was churning the smoke, hurling it upward. Abruptly one of the men shouted wildly, his voice queerly weak and thin to their tortured ear drums after the tremendous explosions.

"She's out," he cried. "She's out! You got 'er, Jimmy! We win!"

The gray eagle looked at him with a slow, dry smile on his seamed face.

"Wait," he said. "Wait and see. Maybe she's out, maybe she ain't."

They waited. The hurtling gas tore the great curtains of smoke into shreds, gathering them into the upward rushing streak of blue fumes, ripping them to flying wisps and firing them up at the sky.

The smoke vanished. A bluish cloud began to form just above the gaping crater, a spreading, blue-gray thing of twisting vapor.

"Damn!" said the State man harshly. "Oh, damn! Damn! There she goes, boys!"

And as he spoke, with dry, whispering cough, a giant new flame came leaping out of the abyss to sweep the blue cloud in a mighty flash, spring high up into the heavens and fill the hole anew with triumphant billows of fire.

"Hot metal, I think," said the gray eagle softly. "Hot metal. I'll move those water lines some and try again."

AGAIN he put on his helmet and gauntlets, went forward to the brink of the flaming crater and peered down, striving to locate the white hot metal, moving the smoking water lines awkwardly about, better to wet the sides of the chasm. Again he came out, waited for the water to do its work, again he went in with a great bomb hugged against his breast, placed it, raced back and blew out the mighty flame. And again in the blue cloud, the sudden dry gasp of new flames born somewhere in the blue depths, leaping instantly upward to giant maturity.

The Flores officials were in spasms of despair. Shelby Underwood, the State oil and gas man, was frowning and shaking his head, wondering grimly how long it would take to subdue the monster, whether it would be done before the field was ruined. Dogged, unconquerable, the gray eagle went on with his work, directing the crews as they moved up more water lines, placing them himself, entering the devastating heat time and again, snarling back at death on the crumbling lips of the crater, placing his lines to drench the flame swept sides of the chasm, waiting while the tons upon tons of water were hurled into the hole to come back as steam.

Another shot. Another failure. And on into the night—weird, unearthly darkness, crimsoned with flame, gigantic shadows leaping from behind the trucks, roaring boilers, the pumps, the moving men, hell pouring out of the bowels of earth, tremendous, unconquered.

Fifteen water lines each sluicing its tons of water into the caving crater now. The great heat shields smoking where the crews had pushed as close to the crater behind their protection as unarmored flesh could stand, the hiss and roar of the burning gas, the flashing clouds of steam dyed red by the flame.

Close to midnight. Everything in readiness for the fourth attempt, the last of the nitro. A thin ring of awed spectators, hundreds of yards back, watching. The big crews of fire fighters, gathered from every company in the field, who had been placing boilers, laying water lines, working behind the shields, now grouped here and there in tired clusters. The little Flores officials wringing their hands. Shelby Underwood chewing gum, weary and disheartened. Over by the red truck the gray eagle, all but staggering in his tracks, putting on his helmet for a final inspection of the water lines in the mouth of hell before he placed his final shot.

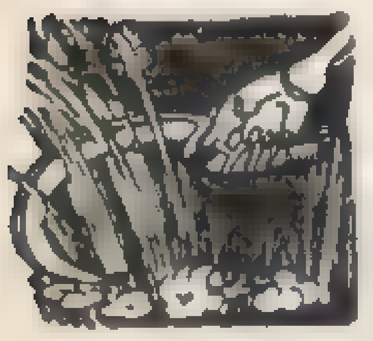
Hours before some one had thrust a crumpled telegram into his hand from old O. K. Curtis, the general manager in Tulsa. Curtis was ordering another shooter in with more nitro to help Jamison. Curtis had been following the fight and it was his nature to anticipate such necessities. But the additional nitro and the relief shooter had not yet arrived. Curtis had not said who he was sending, but the gray eagle knew that whoever the relief man might be, he would have to come a long, long way to get to this isolated field.

He was halfway to the crater when, muffled by the thick asbestos of his helmet, he heard a shout from the men behind. Puzzled, he stopped and turned, peering through the grimed mica eye piece. The brilliant headlights of a car were jolting across the lease toward the gray eagle's own truck and as the approaching machine passed through the glare of a great flood light he saw that it was a big red truck. The new shooter had arrived with the additional nitro. With a feeling of relief the gray eagle turned and went steadily on toward the crater.

Blinding, garish light beat upon him as he entered the zone where the furious heat smote against his armor. Rolling his head awkwardly from side to side so that he could see through the eye piece, he noted that the seared, smoking cracks in the baked earth around the edge of the chasm seemed a little wider than they had been at his last inspection. A big slice of the edge was about due to cave. Portions a foot wide were going down into the flame here and there. He certainly must watch his step.

He reached the edge, moving with the greatest of care, peering over and down into the flames. A giant billow of fire licked up, encompassed him, totally blinding him for an instant. He felt the terrific heat surge clear through his thick armor as he leaped back. He was sickening in the fumes and heat, his head was reeling. Time to get back before he passed out. The water lines seemed to be doing their work as well as could be expected.

He stepped back three steps and his foot caught under the heavy pipe of one of the lines. Pausing instantly, he freed himself, started to take another step and then, with a tremendous heave, the gas, working through the ground from depths far below, ripped a mighty portion of the edge of the crater away right at his back, up-ended it and sent it hurtling out and down into the roaring volcano. The water pipe on which he had nearly tripped lashed up and back in the mighty upsurge of the smoking earth like a striking snake and struck him a furious blow right across the small of the back. With a scream of agony the gray eagle was down, fighting frenziedly to hold his senses through smothering waves of darkness.



SOMEHOW he came back. He was lying on his side, his back to the crater, but very close, he knew, for the terrible heat tore at his armor with insane fury. Only his head, his brain, his eyes were alive, the brain shouting mad commands at a body that would not, could not move. The sea of roaring flame at his back was pulling into itself giant drafts of cooler air along the ground and so he lived in the dashing heat; but the blow had put him out, temporarily at least, and he could not move.

He lay there. A foot in front of his eyes a crack in the smoking earth, blurred through the eyepiece, a foot beyond that another, then another and another. Beyond, reeling, crimsoned darkness. After the first moment of insane panic, his brain, curiously detached now from all his useless body, had started working in a cold, impersonal way.

He might live quite awhile in the furious heat, protected as he was by his armor. He would be conscious, however, only a few minutes longer. Nobody could get to him. Three or four minutes for the heat to begin penetrating the asbestos in real earnest, and he would die.

He looked at the smoking crack a foot beyond his helmet. It seemed a little wider. The crack two feet beyond was wider. A puff of smoking gas blew dust from the edge and opened it a half inch more as he watched.

He knew then. Grimly, coldly amused, beyond all human emotion, his brain was watching, laughing. The bank was going to cave. He was going down into the abyss, down into the flaming mysterious blue. It might be after he was unconscious, it might be right away. No difference. Man wouldn't last an instant in that mighty flame. Going down. Down into the blue. What a hell of a way to pass out! His brain was laughing grimly. Vaguely he wondered whether his dead fingers down there somewhere were trembling.

The crack four or five feet beyond his eyes was widening. Like a grinning mouth. Blue fumes coming from it, curling toward him in the draft. Though there was practically no feeling whatever in his body now, he knew that his back was cooking, blistering, searing in the swift penetrating heat. His brain was not so clear now and the darkness was closing in.

The crack widened. It was a leering, gibbering thing, on the brink of the dancing darkness now, grinning at him, six inches wide. He closed his eyes, vaguely sensed a slight jolt, opened them again. The smoking slice of earth on which he lay had dropped a foot. Flames were coming from the crack and the slice of earth hung poised for the instant before the final slide into the abyss. Gone now. Gray eagle a gone goose. Curiously, he was not afraid. But such a hell of a way to pass out! Grim humor in that. Down into hell. Going—

Out of the reeling red darkness burst a giant figure, white, arms outstretched, the flamelight storming on its hooded face—leaping across the flaming crack and diving toward him.

The gray eagle saw the hooded head come plunging down, almost against his own, sensed rather than felt the sickening jar as the diving figure landed on the hanging slice of smoking earth and instantly, with a reeling, accelerating rush, the slice of earth broke loose in the final drop into the flaming abyss. The gray eagle closed his eyes, a smile on his gaunt face. A giant, invisible hand swooped from nowhere and snatched savagely at him, and the strange figure of the newcomer, and the cold, impersonal grinding of his thoughts went out with a snap in roaring darkness.

Burning agony was the gray eagle's next sensation. He groaned softly, twisted and lay back. His brain, taking up its grinding anew, caught at the twisting eagerly. He had moved! Not paralyzed. Where was he? Something cool was flowing over his seared face.

He opened his stinging eyes with a mighty effort, looked up. The reeling waves of darkness cleared a bit and he could see faces bending close above him, faces dyed with flamelight, faces of his crew, of Shelby Underwood, of Flores officials—of Tex Shackelford!

Tex. In asbestos armor, the helmet removed. Why, he must have been the shooter Curtis sent in. But what—

"I grabbed you, Jimmy," came Tex Shackelford's voice, dim and far away. "Got you just as she caved. How you feeling now?"

The gray eagle looked at him, a vague, wistful smile on his gaunt burned face. With a great effort he tried to speak, failed, tried again.

"I—I'm sorry, Tex," he said softly. "You, you know—"

The great hand of the younger shooter was on the gray eagle's shoulder, patting softly. A queer little smile flickered on his flamelit face as he looked down.

"I know, Jimmy," he agreed gently. "I know what you mean. Forget it. You had plenty reason to be griped at me."

The smile on Tex Shackelford's face broadened.

"Plenty reason," he repeated. "But I'm not so damn' cocksure now. Look here. Jumped into my asbestos the minute I got here and when I went in after you I tied a rope around myself and the boys hauled us back the minute I grabbed you and the bank caved. That careful enough?"

The gray eagle's face quivered slightly.

"That was careful, Tex," he agreed gently. "Prop me up here and you go shoot her out. There's enough water been poured in her this time so I reckon she'll stay out—pardner."

A warm affectionate glow came over the younger shooter's face as he straightened obediently and reached for his helmet.

"All right, Jimmy, I'll try," he said cheerfully. Then to the others, "You guys fix my pardner up good, now mind you. He's an ornery old cuss and not worth much, but we kinda like him. Well, here goes."

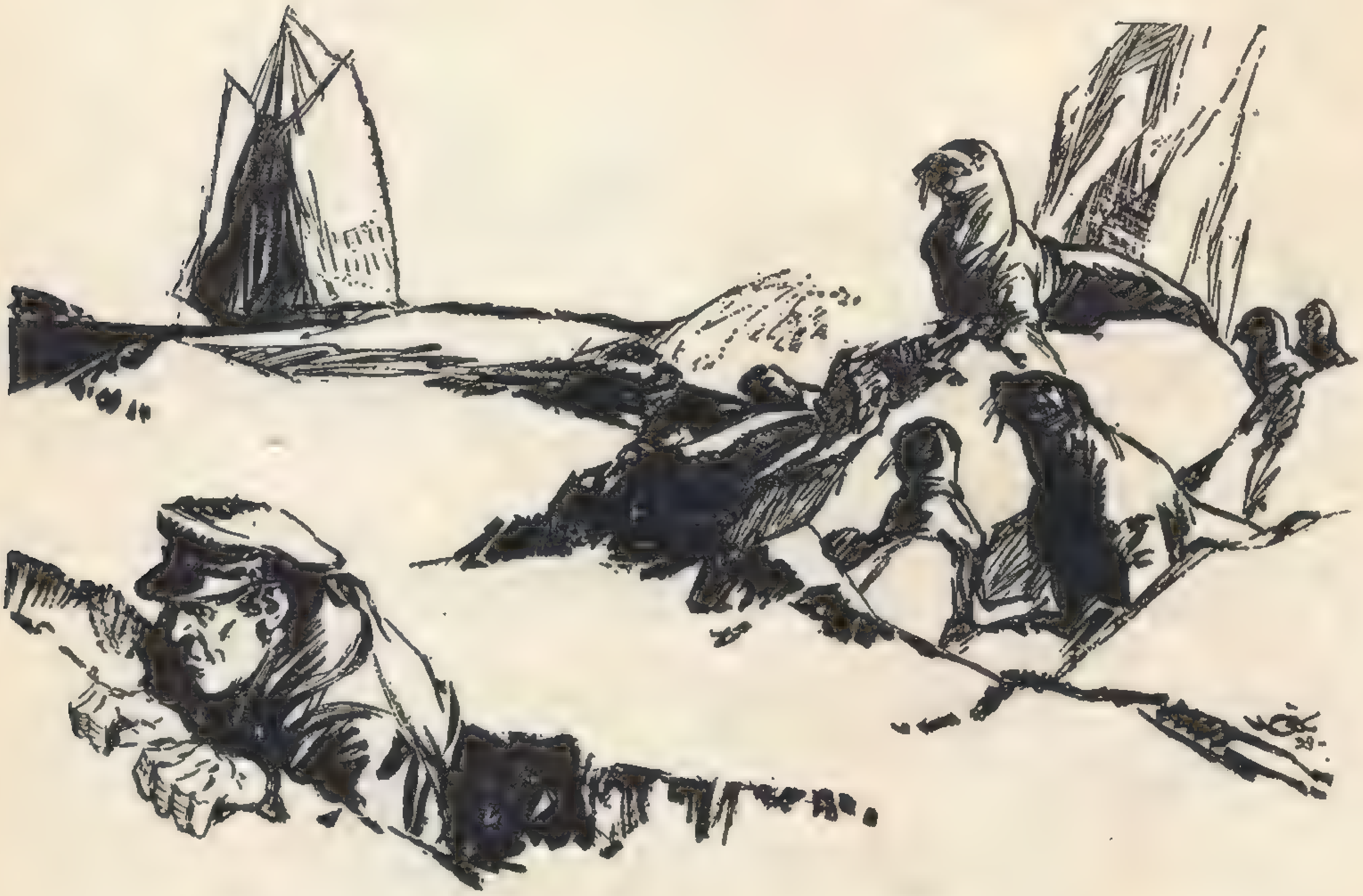
And he was stalking away to pick up the waiting bomb—the bomb which would this time blow out the mighty flame for keeps, permit the crews to get near the crater once it had cooled, dump in hundreds of tons of rocks, scrap metal, heavy mud, timbers, anything and everything and at last effectually stop the draining flow of gas, plug the well and save the field.

Head pillowed on a coat, four men working over his burned body, the gray eagle watched him go, a soft, warm light in his tired eyes. Though his gaunt body was in agony, in his mind was peace, a little glow and a satisfaction beyond words.

With a great effort he raised his burned hand, staring at the tensed fingers. They were trembling.

"Well, tremble, damn you!" said the gray eagle tolerantly. "When two men say they'll meet in hell, and do—"

A Hard Man Gains Mastery Over Himself—at a Price!



IN RUSSIAN WATERS

By R. W. ALEXANDER

THE schooner moved, widened the gap between her long hull and the wharf. The ropes that held her trailed away, fell to the water, were hauled aboard. Men scrambled into the rigging, went nimbly aloft.

A group of idlers watched her go; a group of idlers and a girl. It was evening and as the schooner dipped to the open sea the pale light waned. Shadows closed about the creeping ship. The girl, a lonely figure now, waved.

Two men, watching keen eyed from the stern, saw her wave. Together, their hands went up. Then night shut down; wharf and girl were lost in the gray murk. Only the lights of the harbor showed astern, the shadowy vastness of the sea ahead. A gentle wind came off the land; the rigging began to creak. The ship heeled over.

The older of the two men jerked his head.

"Guess Mary meant that for you."

The other shrugged morosely, turned, strode forward.

One by one the greater stars came out; the lesser followed in little groups. They showed the gray seas marching down, the black bulk of the land. A brig went by, bound for the harbor, silent as a wraith.

Still the older man stood there, feet wide planted, swaying lightly to the lift and fall of the ship, a sturdy, virile figure. But his hair showed gray at the temples, and his face was the face of a man long past his youth. A strong, kindly face, rugged and seamed, it spoke of years of toil.

He watched the waves roll down upon the ship, felt her easy heave and swing, heard the surge of water thrown aside from her sleek bow. She rode lightly, buoyantly—she was a thing alive.

A smile hovered about the man's strong mouth. She was his—from mizzentip to keel she was his. He had worked for her, fought for her, through hard, grim years.

But now all was changed. He was his own master, master of his own vessel. Already he tasted comfort. Soon . . . He thought of the girl who waved from the wharf, and smiled. She was to be his wife. There lay the crown of his success. The sea had ever been his mistress, taking all, giving little. He would desert it now and settle down to the ease hitherto denied him. This was his last trip.

Sard Peters smiled at the stars; and the helmsman, glancing back at him with casual eyes, smiled too.

Forward, the lookout raised his voice:

"Oh, Sally dear, could you not see,
The ship's white sails beneath the sun?
Could you not wait a while for me . . ."

"Mary'll wait," Peters whispered.

"What's that, sir?" said the helmsman.

"Nothing," said Peters. "Nothing."

The schooner headed north. The sea was gray, the sun gave little warmth. A hill of ice went glittering by, palest, clearest blue. Days grew longer, and at night the northern lights flamed across the dizzy sky.

Always, the refrain of the lookout's song ran through Peters' brain.

"Oh, Sally dear, could you not see,
The ship's white sails beneath the sun?
Could you not wait a while for me . . ."

She did not love him, Peters knew. Although she was to be his wife, she did not love him. But that would come with time. Young hearts change easily.

Land, snow covered, flat, loomed on the starboard bow, went past. Again the barren ocean lay ahead.

Sard Peters grew impatient, though the wind was fair. The weeks stretched far ahead, a long, dim time that must elapse before the schooner made port. He began to regret that he had come on this last voyage. Better it might have been, he thought, to let Jim take command . . .

He thought of Jim, his brother's son. Mary loved Jim, he knew. But that was only because they had grown up together. After marriage it would pass. Jim might fret a bit, but—young hearts change easily. A month, and Jim would love some other girl, and Mary would have forgotten Jim.

A FIELD of ice went by, spotted here and there with the dark shapes of seals. They were few, Peters thought, peering at them through a glass. Very few. Not worth a halt. Besides, the ice looked treacherous. Better get farther north. One swift killing, then south again. If luck were his, he told himself, the time might yet be short enough.

They saw more seals on a little island farther north, a thick brown cluster.

"There's a hundred there," Jim said, keen eyed. "A hundred or more. We'll get the boats out, eh?"

"No," Peters said shortly.

Jim stared at him.

"Why not?" He swept a long arm toward the land. "A few men there, an' a few more there, an' we'd have 'em cornered."

"I said no."

"Go to hell, then!" Jim flared, and strode off muttering.

Peters was surprised. It was the first time Jim had shown open animosity toward him. Jim was even tempered, easy going. It took much to annoy him.

"Well, I'm skipper here."

The island dropped astern, became one with the clouds.

Peters tackled Jim on deck that night. All day the affair had rankled within him.

"See here, I'll have no more sauce from you like you handed out today. I'm skipper aboard this ship, an' my word goes. Don't forget it."

Jim eyed him heavily.

"Just because I'm goin' to marry Mary is no reason you should sling out that kind of talk. It's a bad example to the men."

Jim laughed.

"I'm not jokin'," Peters said angrily. "Remember what I said. When you're as old as I am, you'll know better than to bring private quarrels aboard ship."

"When I'm as old as you are," Jim said, "I'll be thinkin' of my grave, not of gettin' married, an' there'll be no quarrel." He started forward, whistling.

"You darned young cub!" Peters cried after him. "You'll sail no more aboard this ship, for that."

Jim halted, turned, came back.

"I'll sail no more aboard this ship? You're darned right I won't! Think I'll hang around after Mary's married?" He leaned forward, thrust his face close to the older man's. "Think I'll see her livin' with a man who's bought her?"

Peters struck at him. Jim caught his arm, flung him savagely aside.

"*Bought* her!" he repeated, snarling. He hammered his chest with a great fist. "It's *me* she loves, *me!* She's marryin' you because you've money, an' she reckons she'll bring the kids up right. She thinks more of them kid brothers of hers than she does of herself."

"Be quiet!" Peters said. "Want the crew to hear?"

Jim sneered.

"What'd they hear that they never heard before? Every one knows she's marryin' you so she can send the kids to college."

Peters knew it. He had known it all along. But he knew marriage would alter all that.

"Better go below," he said.

"You don't like the truth, eh? I ain't surprised. It don't sound nice."

Peters swung on his heel, went aft. Jim's roaring voice followed him.

"Think I'll hang around?"

"The fool!" Peters grated.

Dawn showed them an icy beach dotted with seals in thousands.

"Boats away!" Peters bellowed.

The boats were down, away. The schooner floated idly.

The seals were uneasy, restless. A few made their way to the edge of the ice, dropped into the water. Others began to follow. The men in the boats pulled strongly.

There was mush ice in patches around the edge of the field. The boats crashed through it. One lurched sidewise, turned over. The men struggled in the water.

Peters was raving, cursing.

"The clumsy fools! They'd scare all the seals in creation."

The leading boats turned back, came to the rescue. The men were dragged aboard, the boat righted. All three returned to the ship. By now the beach was empty of seals.

"Bad luck!" Peters muttered. "Bad luck!" He bottled his anger, turned to the men. "Get for'ard an' have somethin' hot to drink."

BAD LUCK dogged them in the days that followed. They searched the islands to the north and found no more than a few scattered seals, not worth the taking. They struck west, with no better fortune. It was as if the great brown herds had never known these seas.

Sard Peters grew silent and morose.

"Impatient, eh?" Jim said to him. "Longin' to be back?" He laughed.

"Shut your mouth!" Peters said. "You've wished bad luck on the ship—you an' your spite."

"I have, I have! May she never reach port again—with you aboard!"

"Stow that, you fool!"

"I mean it."

"You're drunk," Peters said. Abruptly, his tone changed. "Listen, Jim. I worked hard all my life, with nothin' much to live for. Now, you don't grudge me my few years' happiness? You don't, Jim?"

"I do! I grudge you every minute spent with Mary."

"I'll give you charge of the boat."

"To hell with you an' your boat!"

Anger began to flame in the older man.

"You'd have somethin' different to say if I wasn't marryin', if the boat was to be yours."

"I'd have somethin' different to say if you weren't marryin' Mary. It's Mary I want, not the boat."

Peters shrugged, strode away.

The long days passed. Peters spent his waking hours on deck, watching for the great brown herds. But the few seals he saw were in scattered bands of a dozen or less. As yet not a single pelt lay in the holds.

At last his patience gave. He swore, strode to the helmsman.

"Head nor'east."

"Aye, aye, sir."

Jim grasped his arm.

"That'll bring us into Russian waters."

"I know it. There'll be seals there."

"Poachin', eh?" Jim whistled. "I see myself diggin' salt in Siberia."

Peters sneered.

"Afraid?"

With night they ran into fog—thick, clammy fog that hung about the schooner like a curtain. There was no wind; she wallowed in a heavy ground swell, all lights doused. Peters was cautious.

Day came; the fog cleared in patches before a fitful wind. Peters ordered sail spread, and the schooner crept from open space to open space through the clinging mist. He was taking risks he had never taken before. Impatience drove him like a lash.

"You'll end by pilin' her up," Jim said.

Peters snarled at him.

"You're turned yella!"

"You won't have Mary in a Russky prison."

"Leave Mary out of this, can't you?"

"No," Jim said. "I can't."

A cry came down from the lookout in the shrouds.

"Land ho!"

Peters cupped his hands about his mouth.

"Where away?"

"Three points off the starboard bow, sir."

A moment, and they saw the dim loom of it, like a shadow behind the fog.

"Wish it'd clear," Peters said.

As if in answer to his spoken thought, the fog thinned, rolled away; the sun shone through. They saw an island, rimmed about with ice. The ice was black with seals.

"Boats away!" Peters roared.

The boats shot from the schooner's side, headed for the island.

Peters found himself trembling, his hands unsteady. Here, luck granted him, was the end of the voyage. With the schooner's hold full he could head back for port, the future serene before him, his labor ended.

The lookout's urgent voice came down.

"Sail ho! Direct astarn."

Peters whirled. He saw a long bow thrust forth from the fog; a rakish vessel glided into sight. The drooping flag awakened in him swift apprehension.

He roared his orders. The schooner came to life, stirred, gathered way, headed in toward the boats. They had turned, were hurrying back.

A gun boomed, threw a shell across the schooner's bows.

"Fire an' be darned to ye!" Peters said between his teeth.

The boats were near now. Peters took the wheel, brought the schooner round in a great sweep to cover them. A shell struck the water beside her, threw up a fountain of spray.

"Hustle!" Peters roared.

The schooner had lost way. The boats darted in, the men scrambled aboard. Again Peters gave the schooner her head.

"Get 'em aboard, then get aloft!"

A shell struck the schooner for'ard, tore a great gap in her bulwarks. Peters swore. But the boats were in. The schooner filled away.

"If only we can make the fog . . ."

"We'll make it," Jim said. In the danger of the moment, he seemed to have forgotten the enmity between them. "Here, gimme the wheel!"

Peters relinquished it to him. Jim could get more speed from the schooner than any man aboard.

The Russian fired again, and yet again. Both shells went wide. Mist had closed in on the pursuer now; she bulked vaguely through it, like a ship of dreams. The boom of the gun was muffled, distant.

"By God, we'll make it!" Peters breathed.

The drifting wall of fog seemed just beyond the bowsprit.

"We made it," Jim said, and chuckled.

The white closed in about them, shutting out the world. Its dampness was on their faces, cold in their lungs. Island and gunboat were lost astern, shut out by the clammy veil.

"Close call, Jim," Peters said. "But we're safe now, I guess. We'll show a clean pair of heels to that Russky astern."

"If we don't pile her up," Jim said surlily. He beckoned a seaman standing by. "Here, take the wheel."

The moment of forgetfulness was past.

Peters tried desperately to recall it.

"What d'you think we better do, Jim boy?"

"Do what you darn' please."

"They wouldn't expect us to head on into their waters, would they?"

Jim stared at him.

"What I was thinkin'," Peters said, "was this: They'll reckon we'll make for open water, an' they'll do what they think we'll do. Seems to me, then, the best thing to do is head in. How does that strike you?"

"She's your boat," Jim said, turning forward. The mist swallowed him.

"Darn' cub!" Peters muttered.

Queer how Jim had altered, he thought. Queer how a woman could blast friendship, make enemies of men whom nothing else could change. Jim was unreasonable. Peters felt himself the injured party.

"Why can't he act sensible? A month or two, an' he'd have another girl. I ain't got much longer left to live—he'd needn't grudge it to me. It'll be the only happiness I ever had, what I've looked forward to for years."

ALL DAY the schooner ran blindly through the mist, ran deeper into Russian waters. But night showed the sky clear and stars glittering down. The northern lights flared red and green and blue, dancing, whirling.

In two days they sighted the mainland of Alaska.

"Should be seal here," Peters said.

"Should be Russkies here," said Jim.

Peters turned on him.

"Why the hell do you follow me about? Can't you keep your trap shut two minutes on end?"

Jim whistled, hands on hips.

Peters's prophecy was justified. They saw great herds of seal on a beach between two frowning hills.

"This is where we make our kill," Peters said, and sniffed the breeze. "More fog comin'." He stared toward the land. "We could bring her in behind that head an' get the boats away from there. Then there'd be no chance of losin' her if the fog came down." He deliberated. "Seems to me that's the best way, all said an' done."

He took the helm, edged the schooner in toward the land. The barking of the seals came clearly to them across the icy sea, a prolonged roar of sound.

"This'll do, I guess. Get the hook down."

The anchor splashed down, the chain rattled out.

"Boats away!"

He saw them round the jutting head, lost the sound of their oars in the uproar of the brown thousands on the beach beyond.

As he stood, a clammy streamer touched his cheek. He turned seaward, saw a thin white mist descending on the land. The fog had come. It thickened as he watched, shut out the hills and the sea, closed in about the schooner.

He was uneasy, vaguely nervous. He stamped along the deck to warm himself, halted, listened. The seals still barked. The boats should have reached the beach by this. Nothing could have happened . . .

Abruptly, he made his decision.

"Get the dinghy out. I'm goin' ashore."

He went below, took a rifle from a rack on the wall, broke a packet of shells into each pocket of his coat. Bears were plentiful up here; they followed the seals, he knew. A hunter's club was not enough for them when a man was alone. And he might shoot a few seals. Clubbing did not appeal to him.

"Best be careful, sir," one of the men said. "There's a lot o' loose ice floatin' round."

"That's all right," Peters said.

He rowed strongly toward the head. He could not see it; but when he had gone some distance he heard the waves snarling at its base. He rounded it, and the barking of the seals came at once to him, stronger, clearer.

He went more cautiously now, knowing the ice was close. The dinghy was light; he had no wish to stove her in and get himself a ducking.

She bumped against the edge. He threw out the anchor, scrambled ashore.

He came to a narrow fissure in the ice, jumped it, went on. The seals were all about him now, clamorous, dim in the fog. He made no effort to kill any, but strode forward, looking for his men. They were somewhere about him in the mist, silently killing. Sard Peters smiled. A day or two would see the schooner headed south. He was no glutton; a fair cargo of pelts would find him satisfied.

Somehow, he seemed to have passed beyond the seals; their uproar was behind him now. But it was hard to tell with any certainty; the fog distorted sound. He went slowly on.

A movement more, and there could be no doubt. He had passed beyond the seals. He halted, listened, tried to place them. It was very difficult. He took a few steps in one direction, halted again. He had it now. They lay out there, straight before him.

He lengthened his stride. With a hard crash, the ice beneath him gave. He fell up to his chin in powdery snow.

He struggled, cleared a space about him, swearing. He was in a little hollow roofed with ice, ten or twelve feet deep. Just as well the snow was there, he told himself. Otherwise he might have broken bones.

He floundered to the side, started to scramble out. The snow packed down beneath his feet; the hollow was deeper than he had thought. The side was steep, slippery with ice.

He wasted time in swearing, in seeking some place easier of ascent. There was none.

"Darn it!" Sard Peters said.

There was one thing for him to do: chip steps to the ice with his knife. He could fire the rifle until his men came to pull him out; but he preferred the other method. Jim would laugh at him. He had come to fear Jim's laughter.

WHILE he worked, the mist cleared off. He noticed the increasing light, looked up, saw a clear sky.

The second foothold was almost finished when he heard the boom of a gun.

He paused, stiffened. Again it came, menacing, unmistakable.

Feverishly, Peters resumed work.

The third foothold crudely done, he tried to clamber out. His head came above the surface, his hands were out, groping. But he could find no grip, and slowly, very slowly, fell back.

He saw the boats rowing away. He saw the schooner rounding the head. The gunboat was hidden from his view.

"They're leaving me!" he said between his teeth. "That's Jim's doing. The cur!"

He tried again, and again failed; but this time he saw more. A hundred yards out, he saw the dinghy drifting, anchored to a great block of ice broken from the floe. It had parted just before he landed, had just begun its outward drift as he stepped from it. So much was clear.

Beside it was a boat, Jim standing in the bow, hands cupped about his mouth. And about the head the bow of the gunboat showed.

All this Sard Peters saw before he fell back.

Very patiently, he began on the fourth foothold. He was in no hurry; all time was his. He completed it, raised his head above the edge of the hollow.

The boats had reached the schooner now; he saw them swung aboard. She turned to the open sea, gathered way. Out there, the fog still lay upon the water. It would save her, as it had saved her before.

He could with ease, now, have scrambled out; but he did not. Jim was at the helm of the schooner, and with every passing moment he turned to stare back at the deserted beach where the dead seals lay, at the gray water where the dinghy floated, anchored to a block of ice.

Sard Peters knew that if he left the hollow Jim would see him and turn back. And that would mean the capture of the schooner.

He saw it all, with a wonderful clarity. Jim and the others thought him drowned, thought he had walked from the floating ice into the water, blinded by the fog. That was natural enough. They could think nothing else.

The gunboat was firing, quickly but erratically. Peters saw the shells strike the water; but the schooner went on. She reached the mist, plunged into it, was gone. Swirling a little, it closed about her. The firing ceased. The gunboat headed seaward in hopeless pursuit.

Sard Peters laughed, scrambled from the hollow. Gone was his dream, shattered and broken, a poor, futile thing. Jim would go home and marry Mary. The schooner was his now; he could afford it.

Perhaps, Peters thought, that was as well. Youth was for youth, dreams for old age. She would be happier with Jim.

Grim and unafraid, Sard Peters faced the future. He had a knife, a rifle and fifty shells, a box and a half of matches, and the clothes he wore. With these, could he win south to Canada? Perhaps he could, if luck were with him. He might come upon a miner's shack, a trapper's camp, and there find help. And he might not . . .

If he did succeed, what then? He could not return, to shatter Mary's happiness. He must start afresh, on strange ground; start as he had started forty years before, but without the same fresh hope. Life was over and done with. It held nothing more. Why not end it now?

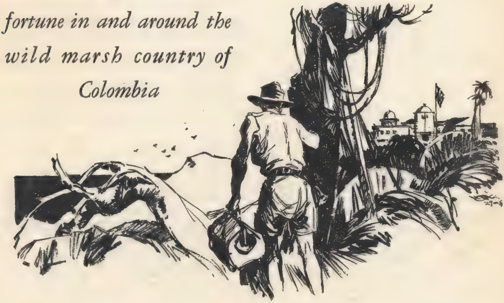
Not for an instant did he entertain the thought. It was the fight that counted; neither failure nor success mattered overmuch. It was the fight, the unending fight that was life itself.

Swiftly, neatly, he skinned a seal, cut the meat into hunks, made a pack. With this, and two other skins to keep him warm at night, rifle in one hand, he struck steadily up the beach, searching for a break in the hills.

CHOCO STORY *by*

Being an account of the adventures of a soldier-of-fortune in and around the wild marsh country of Colombia

GENERAL RAFAEL DE NOGALES



FOR TWO years I had been hidden away from the world in the Gramalote Mountains, near the Venezuelan frontier, writing a book. I had arrived there, at a lonely ranch house, far above the timberline, immediately after the World War, when the French military intelligence service, believing that I was still connected with the war offices of the Central Powers, made my stay in Madrid uncomfortable; and President Wilson, who had it from American missionaries that I was "the hangman of Armenia", saw to it that I did not get my papers to enter the United States. Formerly I had thought that the Andean *paramos* were only useful to set off the spark of revolution. They had often been used as the tinderbox of Venezuela; but now I found that they could also be put to the uses of an excellent library.

I wanted to write my unique experiences as a Divisional Commander and Superior Staff Officer of the Turkish army during the war, and I found that the Gramalote Mountains was the only spot secluded enough and wild enough for the civilized task of stringing words together on paper.

I wrote "Four Years Beneath the Crescent" nine times. I tore it up eight times. By the end of 1922 two copies of it were ready to leave the mountains with me in search of a printing press.

Writing the book had been hard enough, but carrying it around proved to be harder. For weeks on end I was fated to lug it like a mysterious treasure through a hot, fierce, hard boiled world that refused to believe that I had nothing more than a story to protect from its inquisitive greed. Gomez, the Venezuelan dictator, who had done as much as he could to dislodge me from my retreat in the mountains, now developed a desire to prevent my getting away from it. He believed, as I was reliably informed later, that I was writing a book on Venezuela; and Gomez, who is a patron of literature, likes to pay men for writing books and has a strong dislike for books written by those who are not in his pay.

That must have been the explanation of my being followed by a band of desperadoes shortly after leaving the Gramalote Mountains with my servant, Antonio, in the general direction of the Magdalena River. For one whole day we stood siege in a dilapidated ranch-house near the foot of the *cordillera* while a dozen men passed the time by shooting at us and drinking *aguardiente*. Antonio, who was a crack marksman, entertained himself for awhile by shooting the bottles out of their hands and cutting their faces up with the splintered glass; but I warned him that the rum was a better friend of ours than his excellent aim.

This proved to be accurate, for by nightfall we easily succeeded in giving them the slip by the simple device of riding away sober while they continued to besiege the place drunk. They were no doubt brave and reckless men, rendered careless by having been paid in advance, and I should not be surprised to learn that they took the ranch-house by assault several hours later.

Squeezing our way through the wilderness, we came upon the Magdalena River at Magangue, a withering river town on the upper reaches. There we boarded a *bongo*, a sort of schooner, and drifted lazily to Barranquilla, a city of one hundred and fifty thousand inhabitants situated at the narrowest point of the Magdalena delta, two hours from the sea.

Barranquilla was at that time a typical boom town of the Spanish tropics—a town harassed into a boom after centuries of leisurely existence in the sunshine. Oil was a recent discovery in the region, and the noise of trade swelled in its narrow, dusty streets, now thronged with bustling men of all classes, heroically postponing their *siesta* to put some deal over or get some job finished. Tall modern hotels towered above the squat, flat roofed houses of the colonial period.

It was not my luck, however, to be allowed to tarry in this center of tropical civilization, the first I had come to in two years. I had been inevitably recognized in the streets, and friendly revolutionists from my country—Barranquilla is full of them—warned me that I was being watched. Many a loose knife and easily drawn revolver were being carried for my protection. Venezuelan revolutionists are bad *hombres*, and they know how to stick together.

The Venezuelan Government has very few sympathizers among Colombian officials and army men, so that I was kept informed of all moves planned against me by a series of hints that came to me with the regularity of dispatches. The Venezuelan Foreign Ministry was pulling wires to have me interned in some remote village of Colombia, where sooner or later my book might be stolen, or at least accidentally burned. The Venezuelan consul was expecting telegraphic orders from Caracas to request the Colombian authorities to arrest me as a conspirator against a friendly government.

WHILE attending a dance at the ABC Club on a Friday, I was informed that an order for my arrest had been telegraphed from Bogota, but that I would have until Monday to leave Barranquilla in safety. This was due to the fact that my friends there had decided to distrust the authenticity of the telegram, and had requested a written order from the capital.

The American consul, after making me answer a questionnaire no less than three miles long, and after being assured that I was a personal friend of President Harding, consented to visa my passport for Panama. But there was no steamer sailing for that republic for more than a week.

And I had to be out of the Departamento of Magdalena, in which Barranquilla is located, before Monday.

Three friends—Venezuelan exiles—chartered a gasoline launch for me, and that night I slipped out of my hotel. I left my servant Antonio to take my baggage — all except the manuscript — to Colon by the first steamer. Instead of heading for the sea, the launch took me up the river about one hundred miles to Calamar, from which a rickety railroad runs to the port of Cartagena, about fifty miles to the west of Barranquilla.

I had no difficulty in evading detection at Cartagena. By the time I arrived I was dressed as a poor rancher just out of the jungle. I put up at a small *fonda*. A boy approached me, proposing that I buy contraband American cigarets. I told him to fetch me Julian Gonzalez instead. Julian Gonzalez was also contraband, and the boy knew where to find him. In a few minutes Gonzalez, a mixture of pirate, smuggler and trader, was in my room.

I had met Gonzalez at Maguengue where he had stolen, of all things, a *bongo* full of gasoline which he afterward disposed of in Barranquilla. There was a schooner sailing that night for San Jacinto, near the upper reaches of the Gulf of Uraba, the western shore of which is on the Colombian side of the isthmus. It was a trading schooner, he said, and he was the skipper. I knew what that meant. It meant that to all intents and purposes I would have to become a pirate for a few days in exchange for transportation; but I was in no mood to be squeamish.

The telegraph lines, as I suspected, had not yet been extended to San Jacinto; otherwise Gonzalez would not be going there. San Jacinto is a little sea harbor in the Departamento of Antioquia, near the mouth of the Atrato River, and in the marshes of the wild Choco country which runs up along the isthmus to the Panaman frontier. From San Jacinto, Gonzalez assured me, it would be easy to board a schooner for Colon. I trusted Gonzalez implicitly, for being in tight places had taught me that bad men are more reliable than good like to think them.

That night when I went on board the old schooner I found what I expected—a pirate boat which, taking its cue from the great empires of the world, saw fit to disguise its operations as trade. A few bales of worthless goods reposed in the hold side by side with several dozen wicker covered jugs that had the strong smell of a drug store in a prohibition country. Human forms were scuttling mysteriously over the deck, getting things ready. A kerosene lamp swinging from the mast shed a dirty yellow light over the unbusinesslike deck. My cabin turned out to be a crack with a wooden bunk, entered through a trap door on the deck. As I threw my bag in and slid after it, I had the impression that I was descending into a dungeon, a well. It was by no means a reassuring place, but it had the advantage of being easily guarded. I could sit on the trap door with the knowledge that my manuscript would not be tampered with.

Near midnight the anchor was discreetly raised and a land breeze quickly pushed us by the dark, mountainous contours of the Bay of Cartagena. Morning found us far out at sea, on our way to the famous coast of Castilla de Oro, where Nicuesa and Balboa founded the earliest colony on the Gulf of Uraba, calling it Santa Maria. It was from there that Balboa started across the Isthmus to discover the Pacific. I was following on the trail of my ancestors, the *conquistadores*, on a pirate ship about the size of their historic *Carabelas*.

During the morning I had a chance to become acquainted with the crew. They were undoubtedly a company of cutthroats. Most of them carried machetes and six-shooters in their belts. On inquiry, they would assert that they were wandering traders. And an inspection of the hold revealed that they did carry some sort of merchandise which they would honorably leave in the villages they looted. Cocoanuts, tortoise shells, and such knickknacks as they could lay their hands upon, were the goods usually collected along their practically exclusive trade route. They were all curious about the contents of my bag; Gonzalez told them it was books, and they seemed to believe him.

A Colombian revenue cutter heaved into sight during the late afternoon and, after some hesitation, headed toward us. Night came and we lost ourselves among sand flats and islets covered with cocoanut palms. When day broke, the cutter was nowhere in sight. By that time the crew, which had been playing cards and emptying the wicker jugs all night, were fairly drunk. They were getting more and more enthusiastic as the clouds gathered in the southeast, and about two hours after dawn we were skipping along the tail of a raging gale.

Waves now towered above the decks; the lightning broke swiftly and with the metallic sound of a theatrical storm. Once, while Gonzalez and I were at the wheel, we found ourselves suddenly confronted by a foam covered wall of reefs, and barely managed to swerve the schooner around in time to do no more than graze it with our starboard rail. Then a strong current from the land carried us clear of the reefs.

We were near the mouth of the Sinu River, which Gonzalez recognized by the two small islands standing off its sand bar. Approaching one of these islets, we descried three thatched huts just within the edge of a cocoanut grove. It was, Gonzalez informed me, a smugglers' lair, and it sheltered six free-traders—old man Gutierrez and his five sons. Gonzalez gave orders that resulted in the successful looting of this loving family. There is a Spanish saying to the effect that a thief who steals from a thief gains one hundred years of grace, and as Gonzalez' ledger was thousands of years of grace in red ink, he never missed an opportunity to ease his conscience. Old man Gutierrez was his special pet. Gonzalez had looted him four times already, and at that rate, and in accordance with the Spanish saying, there was no doubt that Gutierrez would end by securing Gonzalez' place among the angels.

No argument was possible. Gutierrez was superstitious about Gonzalez. Gonzalez to him was fate. Gutierrez' pride would not let him admit that he could be looted four times in succession by any power less illustrious than fate. After a perfunctory defense, he surrendered on condition that no lives be forfeited. Nothing could have been farther from Gonzalez' mind than to kill a family that incurred great risks and exerted great energies to provide him, on schedule time, with a fair amount of loot.

After loading into the schooner about five tons of cocoanuts and half a dozen bales of contraband goods of various descriptions, we bucked the weather once more.

IN THE breaking dawn of the next day, while I was at the wheel trying to keep the schooner off a reef on which the bottle green waves splintered themselves like so much glass, the forecastle watch shouted and pointed to an object to starboard. It was a long narrow canoe, manned by two Indians who seemed to be at the fag end of an uneven fight against the sea. We immediately laid to and, taking our course in their direction, finally managed to throw them a line. They made fast, and clambered aboard shivering and almost completely exhausted. A shot of hot coffee with rum brought out their story. They were carrying mail—two bags of it—to San Jacinto. By the look in the eyes of the drunken crew, and by their restless movements, I realized that they considered this very interesting news.

Gonzalez, however, proved to be squeamish about mail. Whether it was delicacy or a wholesome respect for the state, I could not determine, but he made it clear to his men that mail carriers were not proper game. This gave rise to a discussion on maritime law, a glib member of the crew maintaining the position that since we had saved the mail from the sea, it belonged to us. Two parties emerged from the discussion, and since both wanted to fight even more than they wanted to rob the mails, they were soon at each others' throats. Gonzalez made fruitless attempts to bring them to reason. The Indians tried to escape to their canoe, and I did the only sensible thing that could be done under the circumstances by one wishing to uphold the sacredness of the mails—I stole as much of it as I could and dumped it down the trap into my cabin.

The two Indians, having been prevented from reaching their canoe, ran to the prow of the ship and jumped overboard. This, and a rasping sound at the keel, brought to the attention of the crew the fact that the boat had drifted over a reef and within one hundred yards of the shore.

In the meanwhile, one of the men had slit the remaining bag of mail open with his machete, and the fight had turned into a scramble for the contents. Letters and packages were torn open in a frenzy, to the accompaniment of curses and shouts of joy, according to the contents found by each man in his grab. The whole yield turned out to be no more than a box of cigars, a pair of boots, an electric flashlight and a few banknotes. When the excitement quieted down because of the urgent need of getting the schooner away from the reef, and especially away from the spot on the shore where the Indians had landed, three men were dead, and five badly cut. We had no time to attend to this minor matter until two hours later when we were once more riding the storm safely. If you add to all this the curious fact that most of the men showed a preference for polka dotted handkerchiefs, which they tied to their wounds or wrapped around their heads, you have a picture of the old buccaneer days, shoved into a remote corner of the Caribbean by the Twentieth Century, but still going strong.

It was, however, more a hospital ship than a pirate schooner that drove through the mist and wind of the following night into the clear tropical sunshine of the next day. The men, wounded, scratched and drunk, were lying on deck mumbling, cursing, telling stories. Very few were sound or sober enough to operate the boat; but those few worked like mad to get to San Jacinto.

The coast of Castilla de Oro now passed before our eyes like a pageant of tropical luxuriance. The bluish mountains cut the horizon into a glimmering skyline, while the jungled slopes slanted in slow rolling lines to the edge of the sea. Right under us, on very clear days, some old Spanish galleons, anchored by gold to the bottom, were supposed to be visible. Whether they are really visible or not, it is certain that many galleons and much gold were sent to the bottom by Morgan in this same Gulf of Uraba.

Followed by a school of sharks and barracudas, which had been attracted by the dead bodies we had fed them, we hove-to opposite the inlet of San Jacinto. This remote outpost of civilization consisted mainly of the gray buildings of a German plantation, with a few dozen huts and cottages scattered along the shore and centering on the heavy clay structure of the customs house. This customs house worried the crew who, after their free handed dealing with the republic's mail, were not feeling quite innocent. Gonzalez decided to send me ashore in a dory and keep out of the government's sight for a time.

But I was ready to show them that honesty was, after all, the best policy. So I produced the bag of mail I had subtracted from the free-for-all and threw it into the dory, along with my own bag containing the much hunted manuscript. The men were inclined to be angry that I had kept the swag out of their hands, but when I explained my purpose they laughed, and showed that they admired me, and no doubt conceived an appropriate respect for the principle of intelligence.

As soon as the dory left me on the beach I hurried to the customs house, where the postoffice was bound to be, and delivered the mail to the officer in charge. We had rescued the Indian carriers at sea, I explained, and here was the mail. The officer thanked me profusely, and even wanted to go on board himself to thank Gonzalez personally; but I told him that that would not be necessary, or possible, as Gonzalez was at that moment hoisting his sails.

THE POPULATION of San Jacinto—about two hundred, all told—consisted principally of shore pirates and beachcombers, with a sprinkling of peons from the nearby ranch. As no telegraphic connection existed with the rest of the world, I felt safe for a time, both against the Gomez agents and against the consequences of my involuntary participation in piracy. The people eyed me suspiciously for a time, casting unquiet glances at my bag. But when a Syrian merchant—and smuggler—took me to his home as an honored guest, I knew that I was in good hands.

This Syrian merchant had read about my Turkish campaigns in the papers brought to San Jacinto by Indian canoes. He had seen my picture. So I spent most of the night telling him about the old country while he smoked his Occidental pipe and his Oriental eyes moistened with Mohammedan blues.

Next morning I was taken with another passenger in the customs house rowboat to the mail schooner which was supposed to take me to Puerto Obaldia, the southernmost outpost of Panama. I was surprised to discover that this mail boat was no bigger than a good sized canoe, although it was provided with sails. A chunk of the starboard planking had been bitten off by time and was patched with canvas and tin. The crew consisted of two Indians, a lean one who obeyed, and a fat one who commanded. Its cargo, besides the mail, was made up of eighteen small barrels of rum, which, together with the two passengers and the fat skipper, brought the craft to within nine inches of the waterline.

My fellow passenger turned out to be a younger son from Bogota started on his political career by an appointment to the remote customs house at Acanti. The first thing that occurred to him as soon as we were under way, was to get out a small kerosene stove and begin making coffee. This operation, I suppose, would have been followed by the writing of some poetry on Paris or Greece—I have noticed that these ubiquitous literary men of my race never see anything that is less than a thousand miles from the tips of their noses—but his stove overturned and we had an anxious moment in putting out the resultant fire.

We were headed for the Atrato River, which breaks into the Gulf of Uraba at its lower angle through a prodigiously complicated delta. We intended to pass it and spend the night ashore on the opposite coast of the gulf, already on the Isthmus, but still on Colombian territory. The wind was as quiet as a sleeping elephant. Our sails hung motionless, and we had to paddle over a sea of glass.

About noon a fresh breeze sprung up and we took on speed. By the time we were five miles from the Atrato, it had acquired the proportions of a gale. We were entering the current of the outgoing waters, poured into the sea through thirty precipitous streams. The abundance of shifting sandbars made sailing in this current rather precarious. And when the gale quickened into a regular norther, crashing the waves of the Caribbean against the onrushing waters of the Atrato, the situation became uncomfortable. The dark green waves rose on every side, and the whole sea looked like a mountain range gone crazy. The boat sank heavily into chasms of water only to rise as light as a seagull on the crest of enormous waves. The whole sky was a drum on which thunder beat a ragged tattoo.

By that time I had thrown off all my clothes except my underwear and my hat. My appearance must have been singular as I struggled with the tiller, with my hat drawn over my eyes and my belt hanging loosely from my hips with a revolver, a knife, and a comb stuck in it.

With the wind blowing full on our unmanageable sail, and the casks of rum rolling along the bottom, the crazy craft leaned ominously to port and was every moment in danger of being swamped. In a comical but absolutely necessary attempt to restore the balance, the skipper hung his two hundred and fifty pounds from the starboard rail, his feet on the edge of the planking, his two hands holding on grimly to a rope tied to the mast, and his posterior lapped by the waves and dreamed about by the sharks that followed the boat, ready to pounce upon its human contents as soon as it capsized. The position must have been nerve racking for the poor fellow, for several times he tried to give it up, and I had to hold him to it at the point of my gun. He pleaded that we throw the casks overboard, at which I vigorously shook my head. If they started getting rid of the cargo, my bag would be among the first things to go, and I had not spent two years writing just to get some publicity among fish.

The other Indian, in the meanwhile, was frantically scooping out the water with a small calabash, while the nonchalant passenger, oblivious to the seriousness of the situation, tried to induce him to open up a can of sardines. I had to tap him on the head with the flat of my machete to make him realize that this was no time for men to eat sardines, but rather for them to avoid being eaten like sardines by sharks.

AFTER several hours of unspeakable anguish the boat was finally thrown against the shore, on the west coast of the gulf; and then we were almost drowned by the rain, which poured down with tremendous force under which the palm shelter we hastily constructed could hardly stand. The spot where the wind and water had thrown us proved to be near the site of Santa Maria la Antigua, the first Spanish settlement on the mainland of America, whose ruins were visible a few miles inland.

Our scant food supplies having been drenched or washed overboard, we devoted the rest of that day to hunting for food. Several dozen turtle eggs, and a small turtle, were the result of our endeavors. We boiled the eggs and roasted the turtle in its shell: and after dinner, the sky suddenly cleared, the wind died down to a fresh breeze, and the stars flew low over our heads like luminous butterflies. All around us was the whispering jungle, ragged and fearful in the moonrise.

The next morning we received a visit from several hunters of the neighboring jungle. They were cimaroon negroes, speaking a guttural Spanish; and, as hunters, they were well armed. The casks of rum were a familiar sight to them, but my bag intrigued them. One of them ventured to lift it up to test its weight and, before we could prevent it, dashed into the thicket with it.

Not daring to leave the boat at the mercy of the other negroes, I appealed to them with frantic gestures and words to join me in the pursuit. The bag, I explained, contained papers with special voodoo incantations and it would cause the death of all of us unless I got hold of it and did the proper ceremonies. The cimaroons are extremely superstitious and, after a short consultation among themselves, decided not to take a chance and joined me in the pursuit.

I dashed ahead, tracing mysterious circles and crosses with my machete in the air, and murmuring absurd maledictions all the while. The negroes followed, yelling incantations and warnings in the direction of their thievish companion.

After tramping the dark jungle for more than an hour, we came upon the ruin of Santa Maria la Antigua. The crumbling stones were shrouded in silence and drowned in a cataract of vines. Giant trees rose from the cracks in the masonry, butterflies of many colors shimmered in the green light. On the steps of the church, whose skeleton steeple we had seen above the trees from the shore, we found the abandoned bag, guarded by a meditative lizard.

I opened the bag at once, and produced a pile of manuscript and several dozen military charts, around which I did a propitiatory dance which the cimaroons did their best to imitate. The peril to all of our lives, and to my literary labors, thus being averted, we picked our way back to the schooner. The negroes then took three casks of rum, and disappeared to celebrate their deliverance from the angry spirits of the air.

The rest of the journey was a continuation of the conspiracy of the elements against my manuscript. In landing at Acanti to leave our other passenger, the customs official, the boat was finally wrecked on a reef, and I had to swim to the shore, pushing my manuscript before me on an empty rum cask. Then for three days I rounded the Cape of Tiburones in a bark canoe, spending one of the nights on shore, at the plantation of a Colombian whose brother had been hanged at the time of the Panama revolt which made the canal possible. From him I learned that the San Blas Indians on the Colombia-Panama frontier, were on the warpath, led by a Mexican desperado who was leading them in an insurrection against the Government of Panama, or at least against some government or other. It might have been the Government of China, so far as the Indians were concerned. All they wanted was to fight. Some of these Indian tribes take to fighting in the same spirit that a good American takes to a summer vacation.

Finally we reached the foaming waterfront of Puerto Obaldia, with its two dozen huts, its barracks, and its two steel wireless towers.

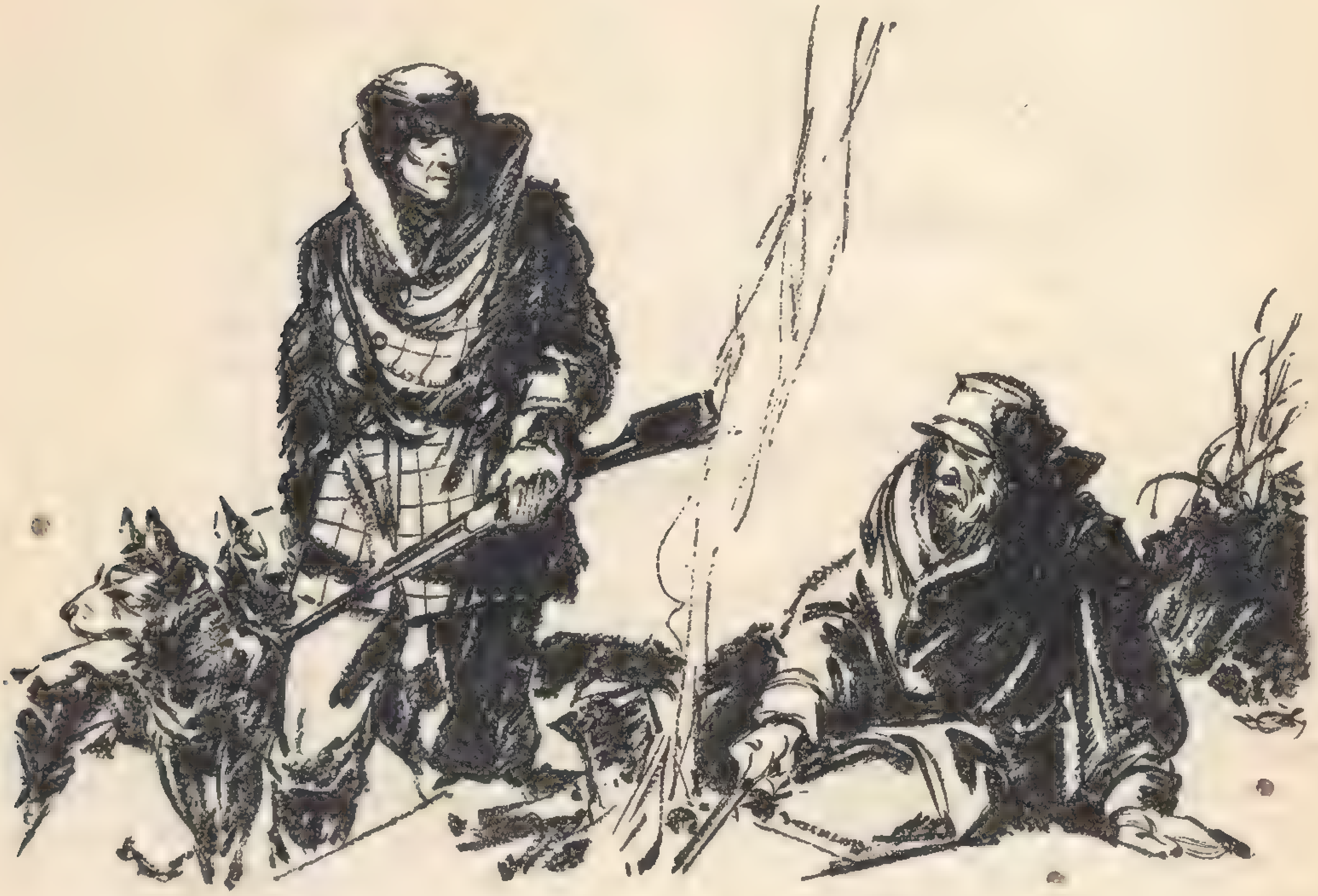
As a result of all this adventuring, a barefooted man in torn B. V. D's with a rusty revolver, a machete, and a comb stuck in his belt, appeared before the commanding officer of the southernmost Panama garrison and demanded hospitality and facilities. The officer—a sergeant—and his dozen companions, received me with grave countenances, scrutinizing both myself and my bag with undisguised curiosity. When I stated who I was, whence I proceeded and where I was going, the sergeant quietly but firmly placed my statements in doubt. He did not believe I was coming from Barranquilla; he did not believe I was General de Nogales; and he certainly knew I was not going to Colon, because he was going to make me stay right there. I was following a route, he explained, taken only by Colombian bandits to leave their country and wish themselves on Panama; and he, as a representative of the Government of Panama, was opposed to this. After all, he said, if I were respectable, why didn't I travel in steamships like other respectable people? When one of the soldiers placed my bag on the table, and he took a look at the maps and charts, he decided that I might be something worse than a bandit, and that he would have to wireless to the capital for instructions.

"Well," I told him, "suppose you wire to the Minister of State and tell him that General de Nogales is here, that he has a scar over his right eye, and a bag full of writing and military charts. I wrote to him from Cartagena that I was headed this way."

The sergeant offered to do this, and half an hour later he came into the room where I was locked up, full of smiles and apologies. From that moment on, he said, taking me into his office for a drink, I was the guest of the Republic of Panama.

Ten days later, as I delivered a lecture in Panama City, in the forum of the Instituto Nacional—at the request of the Panaman government — I discovered among my audience the interested and still bewildered face of the sergeant who had tried to arrest me such a short time before, as a bandit escaping from Colombia in B. V. D's, a gun, a machete and a comb. At this time I had only had occasion to use the comb.

"If you ever meet a man name of Scarn, you tell him I'm walking his trail . . ."



The Bucko Sergeant

By JOHN BEAMES

"HO, THERE, Roy."

Roy had already "hoed", and was sitting on his haunches looking at the log shack. The place had a dead air. The snow before the door was untrodden; no smoke rose from the stovepipe and the small window was opaque with white frost.

"Wonder who lives here? Don't look as if there was any one home," said Uriah Grunch conversationally to his lead dog.

Roy threw up his head, gave two short barks and a long wolf howl.

His master looked at him, a bit puzzled.

"What you want to make that racket for? I don't like to go in a feller's shack when he ain't home. 'Tain't as if we was up against it for grub or anything."

"Ow-ow-ar-hoó!" replied Roy.

His four mates, too, pointed their noses at the cabin door and howled.

"All right, all right, you dern' fools. Only don't blame me if the guy is sore when he gets back, that's all," said Grunch.

The door opened easily enough and he

blundered into the low room. He was a tall, big boned man, extraordinarily untidy and awkward and his big feet were always getting in his way.

A feeble voice said—

"Hello."

Grunch blinked. After the glare of the setting sun on the snow outside, the interior of the hut seemed in total darkness. But presently he made out a blurred mass of hair protruding from a heap of blankets in the bunk.

"I'm a sick man," continued the voice. "If you'd got here much later I'd be gone west. I'm just about froze, but I been too weak to cut wood."

The effort of talking seemed to have exhausted his strength, for the voice trailed away into a murmur and ceased.

Grunch's mind did not work fast. He continued to stand and stare. The shack was very bare; the sick trapper seemed to have burnt everything inflammable before crawling into his bunk to die. His stillness now was alarming.

But he stirred again.

"Get a fire," he said in a husky whisper.

"All right, all right," said Grunch hastily. "I'll make a fire. Hold on now till it's made. You just hang on a little an' everything'll be jake."

He rushed out of the shanty, snatched his ax out of the carriole and looked around for a dry tree. This he attacked with immense energy, felled, lifted upon his shoulders with a tremendous effort, and came puffing back through the deep snow.

In a very short time the trapper's little stove was panting, short and thick, and the stovepipe was cherry red halfway to the roof. The heavy coat of glistening frost that covered walls and ceiling began to melt and come away in patches, and the atmosphere grew thick and steamy.

"Well, this is better," said the sick man in a stronger voice as the genial warmth surrounded him. "Gosh, it's awful to lay all by yourself an' freeze to death a little bit at a time, an' too cold to sleep."

"Sure is," agreed Grunch sympathetically. "Sure is, old-timer. Lucky we been havin' pretty mild weather for Febooary. But nippy today, though. Around ten below, I guess. I better take you on to town with me, eh?"

"If you would," said the trapper eagerly. "Gee, if you would I'd never forget it. I know if I don't get out of here right away I'll die. I got the horrors of it. My brother was to come up with me but he couldn't get away, an' I *never* had such a hell of a time in my life! 'Tain't everybody can tough out a winter in the bush by himself."

"That's so, that's so. Lots goes nutty. I would myself; I got to have company," agreed Grunch.

He busied himself preparing food. The man accepted some pemmican broth with eagerness, and the blueness went out of his lips and something of the pinched, deathly look from his face. But his eyes remained deep sunken in his head and his tangled mat of hair and beard was full of gray hairs. He looked very sketchy and indefinite in the dim light of the little lamp.

Grunch talked. When he found any one who would listen to him he was a tireless talker. Few people would listen, but here was somebody who could not get away. It was not long until he had worked round to his favorite topic.

"Was you overseas?" he inquired.

"Uh-huh."

"Ever know a man called Scarn? Crimer Scarn, they called him. The dirty bum!"

The trapper grunted. It might have been either a negative or an affirmative, but Grunch did not pause to find out. He was giving information, not seeking it.

"My platoon sergeant he was, B Company, Fifth Saskatchewans, the dirty stinker. He was bucko all right. Nothin' posh about him. Crime a feller soon as look at him. Crimed me, crimed me umpteen times. Got me ninety days in the glasshouse, yes, for layin' it across him. It was comin' to him. Crimed me for a dirty rifle. How the hell could I help my rifle bein' dirty? Just out of the line. Passchendaele! Rainin', up to our necks in mud, heavy stuff, gas shells, pip squeaks, whizz bangs, every good damn' thing. Passchendaele, 'member Passchendaele? Awful, gosh awful place. Shell holes full of blood, duckboards out of sight, walkin' on stiffs. An' he crimed me for a dirty rifle. I laid it across him, knocked him endways. An' ninety days in the glasshouse."

He drew a deep breath.

"What battalion was you in?"

"C. A. S. C.—Canadian Army Service Corps—" said the trapper.

"Oh, strawberry jam snitcher, eh? Swipe half the rum ration an' water the rest."

The trapper attempted a denial, but Grunch was in full flood and bawled him down.

"Don't you argue with me. I know all about it. I was there, wasn't I? Plum an' apple, that's all the jam I ever got, an' you know it. Two years in the line an' never seen a pot of strawberry, 'cept once at Bailleul. What's your name?"

The trapper seemed to hesitate.

"Er, Smith—William Smith."

"Huh, Smith. Lucky your name ain't Scarn. If your name was Scarn, do you know what I'd do? I'd pull right out of here an' let you croak. I'd fixed Crimer when I come out, you're damn' right I would. But when I got out of the glasshouse he'd got a blighty. Always lucky, that guy. Yes, an' they give him the D. C. M.—Distinguished Conduct Medal—too, the lousy pup. An' me at Vimy an' Passchendaele an' Hill 60 an' Cambrai, all over. No D. C. M.'s for me, no, just ninety days in the glasshouse. I don't know what come of Crimer. I never seen him since, but one day I will an' then he'll get his. If you ever meet a man name of Scarn, you tell him I'm walkin' his trail with a gun."

The trapper made no answer. He appeared to have gone to sleep. Grunch gazed at him disgustedly, snorted with indignation at the man's lack of consideration, and went out to see that his dogs were comfortable in the lee of the shanty. Then he rolled up in his bedding on the earth floor and slept.

IN THE morning the sick man displayed a curious reluctance to accompanying him.

"I'll be all right," he protested. "I wouldn't want to put you to that much trouble.

"Well, I'm goin' down to Dog River anyway, an' I got no load," said Grunch. "Hell, man, you're too sick to be left an' I can't stay with you. No, don't talk crazy. Come on."

"But—"

"Now, don't you argue with me. You're comin' right along an' that's all there is to it. I can't leave a sick man die."

He arranged the carriole, wrapped the sick man from head to foot in blankets and bore him out of the shanty in his powerful arms.

"My, you sure are ganted up," he said. "Don't weigh no more'n a sick cat. I got to get you in town quick. Mush there, Roy! Hyar, boys, hyar!"

It was a bright and frosty morning with a cruel west wind, which for some time they had to face. Grunch ploughed along in advance, breaking trail, wiping away the tears which the wind brought to his eyes and rubbing his nose from time to time with his mitten to keep it from freezing.

About noon, as he had anticipated, they cut the main winter trail from Dog River to Windy Lake, and turned south upon it at a better pace. With a beaten trail for the dogs to follow, Grunch could trot behind the carriole and maintain conversation by snatches with his passenger.

The passenger was decidedly reticent. There was nothing to be seen of him but a nose surrounded by whiskers and eyebrows covered with hoar frost. But Grunch's eyes gradually became fixed on that nose. It was of unusual shape, broad, thick, prominent, but short, with a square end that looked as if it had been sliced off.

"If you had them whiskers shaved off now you'd look a heap like Crimer Scarn," he said suddenly in a suspicious tone. "There can't be many fellers with a nose just like that."

"But I ain't him," said the sick man quickly. "I tell you I was in the C.A.S.C., an' I never set eyes on you before last night."

"Well, it's mighty lucky for you, because if you was Crimer I'd leave you right here on the road."

He dropped off the runners and trotted behind. The dogs were doing about eight miles an hour. They were crossing Rabbit Lake at the time, with low forest hills on one hand and an endless white plain on the other. The wind was backing from west to north and increasing in strength and severity. Fortunately, they no longer had to face it, but it pierced through fur and clothing and made driver and dogs wince.

The expression on Grunch's face grew more and more lowering. He grunted a curse now and then or flung a word at the dogs, but for the rest he was silent.

At last they left the lake behind them and found shelter and comparative warmth in a forest of close growing spruce. Grunch halted the train and, still in ominous silence, lighted a fire and prepared food.

He brought the sick man close to the fire, threw back the blanket and stared intently into his face.

"Damn' you!" he said. "This is once more you put it over on me. You're Crimer, that's who you are."

"But I ain't," protested the trapper.

"Shut up. I don't want no damn' lies. You know well I can't leave you; you know as well as I do I ain't got it in me. An' you can set there an' grin. My God, just lookin' at you makes me want to kill you."

"But I ain't, I ain't."

Grunch shook a fist under his nose.

"Don't you argue with me. That's one thing I won't stand for. I say you're Crimer Scarn, an' Crimer Scarn you are, you dirty lowlifer! Don't you *dast* argue with me! I got a few things to say to you anyway, even if I ain't dirty enough to leave you die like I ought to did, an' I'm goin' to say 'em. Nor I ain't goin' to take no back talk from you neither. No, sir. Would you take any back talk from me when we was in the Fifth? Was it a damn' bit of use me explainin' or tryin' to make you see sense? Didn't I try an' argue it out with you every time? An' did you ever listen? Not by a damn' sight you didn't. You crimed me. Insubordination. Refusal to obey an order. An orderly room for me. An' now I ain't takin' any back talk from you. I ain't arguin' with you, I'm *tellin'* you; an' you got to listen an' keep your head shut!"

For more than an hour he recited his manifold grievances against Crimer Scarn. He seemed to have kept an accurate mental record of every clash with that martinet and of every punishment which had resulted therefrom.

The sick man sat through it all with a face that was partly bored and partly frightened. When Grunch shook a great hairy fist at him he winced; when Grunch picked up an ax and demonstrated exactly how he would like to split his skull for him his eyes took on a piteous expression. He made one or two feeble attempts at denial, but, finding that they only exasperated his accuser, wisely kept silence thereafter.

The wind increased, roaring in the firs overhead with a most menacing noise and occasionally sweeping down to set the smoke of their fire spinning. It was due north now and the temperature had fallen far below zero.

Grunch talked himself at length almost into a good temper. He prepared to take the trail again.

"This is no weather for a sick man to be out in," he said. "May as well take you right through to Dog River an' get you in hospital. We'd ought to make it in about seven hours. Feller don't get a awful lot of sleep campin' out as cold as it is anyway."

The sick man sighed with relief. Grunch bundled him up again, not ungently, and replaced him in the carriole, covering his face carefully so that only a little hole remained for air. The five huskies were urged to their feet, and pattered away after the strong and experienced Roy.

ROY WAS old as sleigh dogs go; this was his eighth season. There was very little he did not know about blind trails and blown in trails and lost trails and blizzards and bitter temperatures and glare ice and starvation and all the manifold hazards and brutalities of a northern winter.

And best of all he knew the Dog River-Windy Lake trail, for he had traversed it in all weathers for the past three seasons.

He had the independent spirit, the innate dignity, of a true husky. He was faithful and willing and brave, but he had no high opinion of the intelligence of his wrong headed, blundering, argumentative master, and he never hesitated to differ with him when he thought the occasion called for it.

The wind had increased to a raving gale, and the sky was black and cold and full of frosty stars, with the trail merely a discolored line on the snow, winding deviously among the groaning, straining firs. Once they crossed a small lake where the wind went by with a demoniac howl in a procession of sheeted ghosts fifty feet high. One of these ghosts enveloped them momentarily and passed on, leaving eyes and ears and nose and mouth filled with dry snow as fine as sand.

Beyond that was more heavy bush and the wind no longer smote them, but it grew darker and darker. Grunch, looking up, saw the stars blotted out by a racing black cloud. Here and there they reappeared, twinkled fitfully a moment, and were swallowed up by another cloud dragon.

But the trail was firm under the feet of the dogs, no snow had yet fallen, and they were not more than thirty miles from Dog River. He decided to drive on; if he could beat the coming blizzard into town he would be saved all the toilsome work of breaking trail through heavy drifts.

He shouted to the dogs and cracked his whip. He was a strong runner for all his awkwardness and he swung along behind the carriole at a fast trot.

They left the forested lowland and climbed gradually to a fire swept plateau. Nothing grew here but low willows; and gaunt rampikes, black and dead, lifted skeleton branches through which the wind piped; and charred stumps thrust up everywhere through the snow.

And here the blizzard caught them. The wind seemed to swing all round the compass; now thrusting at their backs, now buffeting their ears, now almost halting them with a wave of gritty stinging snowdust in their faces.

For a little while there was a trail. Grunch never knew when they left it; but very soon they were ploughing painfully through a succession of rigid drifts. They slid down slopes where his eyes had assured him the going was level; or steep ascents confronted him and yet they did not ascend. All vision was confounded and a muffled tumult raged in his ears.

But Roy kept steadily on, as if quite certain of the way.

Grunch let him go, but presently the demon of doubt entered into the man, the bewildered certainty that the direction in which they were going must be the wrong one—which assails every one in a blizzard in the dark.

"Gee over, Roy, you're crazy," he shouted. "Gee over!"

The dog either did not hear him or paid no attention. Grunch wallowed forward to take the lead himself. Roy displayed a reluctance to follow him, continuing to struggle along on his own course despite all shouts and objurgations.

Grunch caught him by the collar.

"Don't you argue with me," he yelled. "This time you are off your beat. You think you know too dern' much; you're too bull headed. There's no trail here, not a smell of a one. You listen to me once. Just for this time you let me run this here outfit or I'll have the hide took off you with the blacksnake."

With a resigned air the big husky obeyed. Almost immediately Grunch found himself in a wilderness of stumps, half buried in the snow, against which he continually barked his shins, and among which he had the greatest difficulty in guiding the train. Twice the carriole hung up and he had to go back and lift it clear.

The snow came down harder than ever; the wind blew in gusts of appalling fury; the drifts were deeper with every passing minute. The country became unaccountably rough. Grunch was forever blundering unexpectedly into gullies, from which he only extricated the train with the greatest labor and difficulty, since the dogs were buried to the ears in snow and the carriole became a snowplough.

At the end of two hours he was exhausted. He felt the need of human companionship, and was suddenly filled with an unreasoning fear that his passenger was dead. The carriole was by now a mere mound of snow which he had to brush away to reveal the little hole through which the sick man received air.

He bent down and shouted—

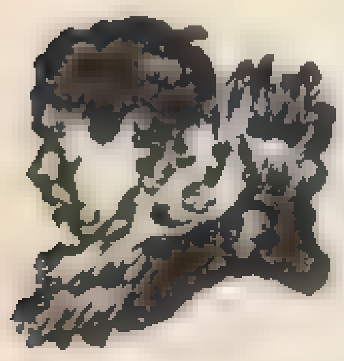
"How are you?"

"All right, but pretty near smothered," answered a muffled voice. "There's snow all around my face. I'd like it if you'd take it out; some of it's meltin'."

Grunch pulled back the blanket and scooped several handfuls of snow from around the trapper's face.

"Where are we?" asked the man in a slightly anxious tone.

"Well, I don't rightly know," admitted Grunch. "I got so turned around in this damn' blizzard you might say I was lost. But never mind," he continued more confidently. "I'll get you to Dog River even if you are Crimer Scarn."



THE DOGS had lain down, exhausted by their efforts and apparently indifferent to their fate. He had great difficulty in getting them up again, and Roy resolutely refused to follow him any farther. Grunch threatened him with the whip and he rolled over with his feet in the air and yelled piercingly, but when dragged to his feet again he maintained his refusal to follow.

"Well, damn' you!" Grunch yielded at last. "You can't be no worse lost than what I am. Go on your own blasted road then, an' if you don't bring us out right I'll have your hide off in strings."

Roy strained at his collar, and his four mates, as if filled with renewed confidence and energy by the knowledge that he was again leading them, diligently set themselves down to pull also. Grunch fell behind and assisted by pushing.

They went on for some time, apparently as aimlessly as ever, still smothered in snow, still beaten upon by furious blasts, still wallowing in bottomless drifts.

Once more the conviction grew upon Grunch that Roy was lost and heading in the wrong direction, but he no longer had any confidence in his own sense of direction.

He was tired, so tired he could hardly drag one foot after the other, and the dogs had fallen to a crawl.

A snow flurry enveloped them, and he bent his head and closed his eyes, stumbling blindly along. He kept his eyes shut for some time, guiding himself by the back of the carriole. It rested his eyes and relieved the ache caused by staring fixedly through the giddily dancing flakes.

When he looked up again he saw before him a heavy black line, quite close at hand. For a moment he did not understand what it was and then he gave a faint shout of joy. It was the protecting forest, safety from the blizzard and plenty of wood for a roaring fire.

He asked himself whether Roy had merely stumbled upon it blindly. Was he upon the trail? Soon the trees stood close ranked on either hand, the baffled wind roared harmlessly over their heads and the snow fell upon them as softly as a blessing. They were upon a trail, undoubtedly upon a trail, he could feel it under his feet, and it could be none other than the Dog River trail.

Tears came into Grunch's eyes. He stumbled forward and gathered the weary Roy into his arms and kissed him on his broad black muzzle. Roy condescended to lick his face with a tired and feeble tongue.

"I take it all back, you old bum," Grunch apologized handsomely. "Here's where we camp; we done enough travelin' for one night."

Early on the following morning the three or four hundred inhabitants of Dog River beheld approaching them through the still falling snow a worn and weary train of five dogs and a tall and stumbling driver with a frostbitten nose.

Plodding slowly down the single street of the village, he was hailed by curious friends.

"Hey, Ury, what you got there?"

"Sick man, name of Scarn. Takin' him to hospital," he replied in a surly tone.

"Scarn, Scarn, what the deuce? That must be my brother Bill," said a short, square built man, with a face that looked as if it had been hewn from a block of granite with a blunt chisel by a neophyte sculptor. His nose was a peculiarly rough piece of work—short, broad, thick, prominent and square ended.

He approached the carriole hurriedly. Grunch looked up and saw him, and his gray and drawn face flamed crimson.

"Crimer Scarn, by the livin' Moses, you dirty, lousy, lyin' child of the devil."

The square built man halted.

"Why, that you Grunch? I be damned. Still got a pick on me?"

"Yes, I have got a pick on you," said Grunch, sitting down weakly on the carriole, "an' if I wasn't that played out I can't hardly stand up I'd lay it across you right. An' if you stick around awhile till I get rested up, I will lay it across you yet."

Ex-Sergeant Scarn nodded with a little twist of his inflexible mouth, that might have been meant for a smile, and bent to twitch back the blanket from the sick man's face.

"Begad, it is Billy," he said.

"It's me, Jim," returned the sick man. "What there is left of me. An' this lad's dragged me all through the most gosh awful blizzard I ever seen, and all the time believin' I was you."

Ex-Sergeant Scarn stood up, very square and erect. His granite features worked curiously.

"Grunch," he said in a thick voice, "I want to thank you. I'm sorry you got a pick on me. Maybe I was a little hard on you, but I only done my duty. You was a bad soldier. Your uniform an' equipment was always dirty; you was insubordinate, an' you never would quit arguin'. I was sorry when you went to the glasshouse. If I hadn't softened my evidence you'd have got a year in clink. Anyway, never mind that. You saved Billy, an' if it'll do you any good you can kick me all around this village an' I'll stand for it without beefin'."

A half shamed grin appeared on Grunch's haggard face.

"Aw, hell!" he murmured. "I'm too damn' tired. An' besides, I seem to have took all my mad out gettin' this feller drug through that blizzard."

When an English Nobleman

WOLF

CHAPTER I

REMITTANCE MAN

THERE was nothing at all at the little desert station of Cuesta except the station itself and its necessary accessories, these being a long row of cattle pens and chutes on the opposite side of the tracks and a small, barnlike red house in which the station agent lived. The station itself was also small and red but more like a shed than a barn.

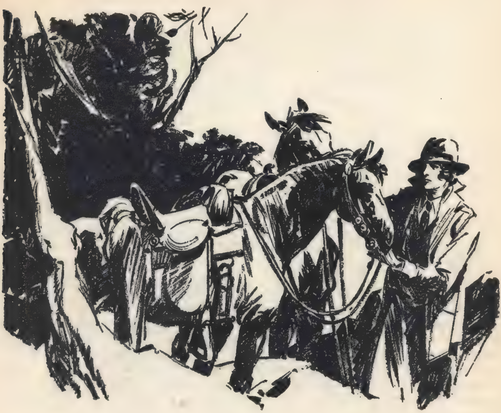
There was nothing in sight from the station, either, except scenery, and that of no very interesting order. It was flat scenery, or approximately so, and its vegetation was as monotonous as its aspect, consisting of brownish yellow grass in tufts which were interspersed with scattering, smoky green clumps of sage, yellowing and sickly looking cacti, spiky and threatening stools of yucca. The entire effect was of a yellowish plain at close view, merging into a blackish and mottled green farther away and in the distance assuming the hue of *café au lait.* There was, to be sure, a sort of boundary to this vista, but it was indistinct and hazy, a misty wall of indeterminate gray hanging just below the jadelike sky horizon.

There was no sign of water anywhere to be seen, not even the scanty growth of willows that might have marked the dry course of some intermittent stream. Yet even a station master on a desert division has to have water to drink. This station agent, in fact, survived by virtue of succor regularly brought by the local mixed train which hauled in, at intervals, a small tank car of the necessary fluid. It stood on a siding not far from the house.

There were two or three roads, though they were hardly more than apologies for a real road, and they appeared to come from nowhere and to be just as indeterminate as to where they went from there. They were simply tracks, parallel ruts worn in the surface of the plain, branching casually off into space.

Curly Bill Simpson was the station

Came to the Sunburnt West



BAIT

by WILLIAM WEST WINTER

agent. He lived there with a rather faded and listless wife, and from hour to hour did whatever occurred to him to pass the time away. Except at the rare intervals when cattle or sheep were being shipped there was nothing much to do. Hardly ever did any one visit the station and scarcely any passengers from the few trains which stopped at Cuesta descended there; and such as did left immediately by previously arranged conveyance.

There was no post office, the railway mail clerk merely leaving, as the mail train passed, such bundles of mail as were directed to the station agent. Very occasionally among these official communications was to be found a letter or two directed to some individual residing at some point to which the rural mail system did not yet penetrate and too remote from the established post offices to furnish a point of call for the addressee. The station agent held these as a matter of accommodation and courtesy until the recipient should call or some passing pilgrim could carry it on.

There had been none of these communications for a long time. The last had been an imposing and official looking document of a distinctly legal aspect which had come addressed in old fashioned copper plate handwriting to:

> The Hon. Gerald Vivian Satterlie Cowper,
> Rancho Negro, Black Cañon, Arizona.

Now, that was no address at all as far as the postal authorities are concerned. It gives no town or post office, for Rancho Negro is not listed in the "Postal Directory" and Black Cañon is absent from its pages. Yet the ubiquitous sleuths of the Department had come near to solving that puzzle when they wrote on the envelope, after heaven knows what research, the legend, *Try Cuesta Station.* And when the mail clerk of the *Flyer* tossed the letter off with those he held for the agent, Curly Bill was not long at a loss to know who the addressee was. It was, as a matter of fact, that reference to Rancho Negro, Black Cañon, which put him on the track. He had examined, with some stupefaction, the name of Hon. Gerald Vivian Satterlie Cowper, but his face lighted up with the pride of discovery when he came to the location.

"Why, dogburn my buttons, Mame," he said to his wife as he turned the epistle over and over, with an eye to the foreign stamps and the elaborate engraving of the firm name on the envelope, "this here must be somethin' fer Stinkin' Jerry Cooper up on Harmony Run. 'Rancho Negro.' Do you git that? Stinkin' Jerry had notions thataway, they do tell, wherein he labels that shack of his'n like it was an oiler domain! And it's in Black Cañon, all right. But however do those post office fellers allow I am going to git any sech literature away up there?

"Looks right important, too. Looks, from the corner, as if there might be as many lawyers in that there outfit as would stock a legislature. 'Peagram, Wilde, Wilde, Peagram and Peagram!' Whyever don't them Britishers use sensible language? Why don't they put it 'Three Peagrams and a couple of Wildes', like sensible folks? 'Solicitors, Gray's Temple Inn'. That there means they are lawyers. I read a book once where there was a murder committed in one o' them places and they was all lawyers livin' there. But that ain't here nor there. Looks like Stinkin' Jerry was gittin' news from home and it is plumb likely to be delayed a heap when he finally reads his lovin' missive."

Mrs. Simpson was not only faded but languid. She had lost even her womanly curiosity. She merely stared owlishly at the document and commented briefly and not at all to the point—

"Who is this here Stinkin' Jerry, Curly?"

"Remittance man," said Curly Bill, scratching his head, "and a particularly low specimen of them at that. I've seen a many, British, Down Easters and even a Frenchy or two, sent to this here boundless West to git 'em out o' the way from the folks at home. Some are good, some are bad and some are indifferent. Some go to work, some take to drink and some ain't even got savvy enough to do one or t'other. But this here Stinkin' Jerry, from what I hear tell, is the prize o' the lot. When he first hit this country, ten or twelve years back, with his squaw—"

"Land's sakes!" exclaimed Mrs. Simpson. "Was he a squawman, too?"

"He shore was," said Bill. "When he first hit this country he was legally wed to a Navaho Injun lady, and what is more he was parent to a male offspring five year old, and as yaller as a punkin. But his squaw leaves him and either dies or goes back to her own folks. Anyhow, this here Stinking Jerry—so called because he is something approaching a polecat or a Digger Injun—when he first alights in this country is a remittance man and gets money from home. It is then he takes up a homestead in Black Cañon for the reason, as he puts it, that he wants to git as fur away from the neighborhood of us Americans as he can. When he is drunk he has a bad habit of gittin' unpleasant in his remarks, and as he is mostly always drunk he ain't any too popular with any one—and neither is this here lowbrow halfbreed of a kid he has with him.

"Not that it is only Americans he runs down. They say he gits almost equally scurrilous when it comes to his own folks. Now I come to think of it, he cusses out his people frequent and free, and I've heard him, when he was in his cups, roar and laugh and shove his kid, all freckled and yaller, with a squint eye and his black hair hangin' over his Injun eyes, up front of the bar while he hollers out that this is the joke he is goin' to play on 'em. Seems like he figures that his high toned relations can't somehow dodge acceptin' this breed into the family, and the idea sure tickles him silly. I gather there is some law or other in England which works thataway.

"But, contrarywise, while he is so sot on shamin' his folks with this offspring of a Navaho squaw, he brags a lot about how high toned he is and how superior, which it ain't noticeable from any way he acts. I reckon even his relations gets wind of how he carries on, because after he gits this claim up on Harmony Run it seems like they git tired of sendin' him money.

"He starts in to build him a regular place, but he don't finish it none. He allows he is goin' to stock it with fine hosses and cows and show us savages how a ranch ought to be run. But he don't carry none of that out, either. He gits him part of a house built, and it ain't so razzle-dazzle a house, neither, and he gits drunk and allows he is goin' to astonish us all with his stock. But before he gits fur along that road somethin' happens to shet off his money from home.

"Well, what does this ornery Stinkin' Jerry start when this here news come? He gits drunk again and he raves about them relations somethin' cruel. He allows he'll git even with them and that he'll make it so that this here Cooper family—or, I reckon it must be Cowper, judgin' from this letter—that this here high toned tribe o' his'n will never more hold up their heads in good sassiety. He jolts his darned old scrawny kid one in the back and yells to every one to look at him and see what was goin' to be the future lord o' the manor, which is what he calls him; and the kid just grins and cowers and looks at him out of a corner of his eye. And I thinks to myself that if I was that Britisher I would go a little easy with this here mixed breed. There is somethin' Injun in the look he gives his daddy which ain't pleasant to see.

"Howsoever, with the money gone there ain't much Stinkin' Jerry can do. What he can do, he does, and as usual it is ornery. He says if he can't raise blooded hosses and cows he will raise hell or goats, and he does both. He settles down like a hermit upon Harmony Run and he lives worse than any hermit ever did. Low is no name for the kind o' life he lives! No Injun, even a Digger, would be as squalid as him. And mean—hush, Mame! He ain't just ornery mean but he is *crazy* mean. He gits him a bunch of Mexican goats, than whom there is no lower breed of goats, and he runs 'em up and around Black Cañon so's a cow or even a sheep would find rations mighty scarce.

"There is no one livin' there nohow but One Lung Pete Sturgis who is watchin' the cañon fer the Power Company and holdin' their claims fer them. Pete is strivin' to help out with a bunch of cows and his girl is helpin' him, but when Stinkin' Jerry comes in with his goats it ain't much use. Well, well! And so he's the Honorable Gerald Vivian Satterlie Cowper, is he? I'm thinkin' Stinkin' Jerry fits him better."

"How you goin' to get that letter to him, Curly?" asked Mrs. Simpson practically. "From the way you talk I reckon no one would put themselves out a heap to drag it to him."

"Not me, nohow," said Curly. "The first gent goin' that way can tote it along if he's willin'. And, at that, I reckon it will be some moons before Stinkin' Jerry gits his mail. And I don't give a damn!"

And with that he departed to nail up in a conspicuous place a recently arrived broadside offering a reward for the apprehension of a certain notorious murderer.

CHAPTER II

STRANGERS TO THE WEST

THE Intermountain Utilities, Inc. had acquired water rights to Harmony Run in Black Cañon a number of years ago, in a moment of foresight. But as such rights are subject to adverse claims of possession and prior use, to say nothing of invasion on the part of squatters or cattlemen, though the company had no present intention of developing the possibilities of the place it thought it worthwhile to maintain there an employee who should hold the site for the future dam against any usurpation. And to this end it had built a house and installed therein one of its trusted henchmen who, developing tuberculosis, required the healing benefits of a mountain climate.

The position amounted virtually to retirement on a liberal pension and the incumbent, Mr. Peter Sturgis, a gentleman somewhat advanced in years, had occupied it in comfort and content for almost a decade. He had a daughter, to whose education the company saw; and when she had finished it she spent a good deal of her time in residence at the isolated station where she helped to make her father comfortable.

Of late years there had been trouble—though not of a serious nature. A remittance man, one Jerry Cooper, as he was known, had taken up a claim in Black Cañon and was running goats there. If that had been all, the company would not have cared. But Cooper had developed a streak of viciousness which led him to make all the trouble he could for Mr. Sturgis and, as the sick man was physically unfit to hold his own, the remittance man had made his life more or less miserable for some time—though he had pluckily stuck it out against all manner of persecutions from Cooper and his ill favored son. When Miss Sturgis some three months back had finally returned to her father, the company had hoped that she might be able to make some headway against the enemy, but this hope was soon dashed by the receipt of a message relayed through cowboys and sheepherders which stated briefly:

> Father died June 6. Poison. I will hold on here until you send me help.

There was something about the very reticence and brevity of this that emphasized a need. The chief of the locality involved considered it carefully. It was one of the merits of Intermountain Utilities that it was loyal to people who were loyal to it. Sturgis had a claim upon it which was not wiped out by his death. The daughter inherited that claim. Her message, bare of all detail, by that very fact told a great deal and hinted at more. Her father was dead of poison. There was a world of threat in the very word. She stated that she would hold on until help was forthcoming. But that argued that she was in peril and that help was needed.

The company had no intention of disregarding that appeal. The chief looked up his available resources and sent for Hasbrook. He had no better man. In fact, they do not come any better than Sam Hasbrook, and very seldom as good.

He was a native of the Southwest to begin with, the son of a rancher who, following an adventurous disposition, had joined one of the company's exploratory parties some years before. When that party had been threatened and endangered by a rival concern, he had developed a certain quality of shrewd courage and ability which had saved it from the planned disaster. Since that time he had proved useful on more than one occasion which required the exercise of his talents. He had been bred from childhood to rope and saddle and gun, but he also had a fair education.

SO IT WAS Sam Hasbrook who swung into the chief's office and had the message laid before him. He had returned not long since from a trip into Lower California where there was a job in contemplation which had struck a snag—the agent of the company having been kidnapped by bandits, suspected of being in the employ of certain politicians who had designs on the company's treasury. The agent had been duly rescued and the surviving bandits were wondering somewhat ruefully just what had happened to them.

"You deserve a rest, Sam," said the chief, "but I know you don't want one. Look that over and tell me what you think of it. The sender is a girl, raised partly out there and partly at a boarding school. Nineteen or twenty years old and with a firm chin. I'd say she had a level head, too. You know Pete Sturgis?"

Sam looked up from the message. He was generally smiling, mildly, as though he got a gentle amusement out of life and its vagaries. He was a good looking young fellow, with a splendid physique, characterized by a deceptive attitude of relaxation. But when he moved he moved with the effortless smoothness and grace of a python, which never seems to be in a hurry but can split seconds into infinitesimal fractions.

"Met him once," he said. "Game old fellow. You say his daughter wrote this? A girl? H'm! Who poisoned him?"

"You think some one did?"

"It's likely enough unless he took to eating loco weed or wolf bait on his own hook. Girl needs help too. I reckon she isn't yelping because she's lonesome and the coyotes scare her? Not that kind?"

"Not according to my judgment of her."

"All right! What's the layout up there?"

The chief outlined the situation as far as he knew it. The girl was located on Harmony Run, a spring fed creek in Black Cañon some miles above the juncture with Elkhorn Creek. The place was in the Elkhorn Mountains, at least thirty miles from the nearest settlement, a town called Barton, consisting of a couple of stores and a saloon, and located in a small, well watered valley on the other side of the range from Black Cañon. The post office was at Barton, though the town was not on a railroad. Fruit and hay were raised by small ranchers near the town, but the eastern face of the range was practically uninhabited, most of it being semi-desert, though Black Cañon itself, owing to peculiar circumstances, was a sort of isolated and hidden paradise. The nearest railroad point to the place was at Cuesta, from which the cañon could be reached by a ride of about sixty miles. A good man could make it in a day.

Sam also listened attentively to the account of Jerry Cooper and his half-breed son and of the ill feeling that had existed between the remittance man and the company's agent. But the chief was not even so well informed about Jerry as had been Curly Bill Simpson on the day, now some weeks past, when the mysterious letter had come for the remittance man. About all that Sam got from this account was that Jerry Cooper was a rather evil and unsavory character, probably not far removed from degeneracy.

"Nice little gang to be neighbors to a young and lonely lady," he commented when he had heard all there was to tell. He rose and picked up the soiled and crumpled message and thrust it into his pocket. "All right, Chief. I'll look into it. But I don't allow to hole up in this lonesome Eden for any longer than there's a job of work. As soon as I clean up there you better arrange to have some other one lung pensioner in search of solitude and fresh air ready to move in. I'll want a box car for my horse put on No. 18 tomorrow. I'll head in from Cuesta and there isn't any need to send word along the line that I'm coming."

The chief shook hands with Sam and Sam departed, whistling, and walking with a slight swaying of shoulder that was peculiar to him.

ON THE following evening No. 18 stopped at Cuesta long enough to cut out a box car containing a horse and accouterments and to allow three passengers to descend. This was unprecedented and Curly Bill was almost prostrated at the sight. One was Sam, who was now clad in range costume and who immediately laid claim to the horse and proceeded to get the animal out of the car. Curly Bill did not know Sam and took him for some extraordinarily affluent cowhand on his way to join his outfit. But the other passengers completely floored the station agent and he stood gaping at them from where, up the track, he was standing for an instant to exchange words with the engineer and conductor as he handed them their clearance.

"Well, gosh all hell!" he remarked as he gazed. "Whoever lets them pilgrims loose on me, Jim?"

The conductor grinned as he started back to board his train and at the step paused to give the engineer his signal before he swung aboard. Hanging to the rail on the step as the train started to move, he answered with a malicious accent.

"A couple o' tourists, Curly, out to look at scenery. Cousins o' the duke, I reckon, and the company expects you to treat 'em distinguished. Anything you can do for 'em will be entered on your record. So long, and don't let 'em break a leg!"

Curly Bill wandered feebly down the track and eyed with misgiving the two passengers who, amid a quantity of luggage, consisting of huge telescoping bags, rolled steamer rugs and two trunks which had been unceremoniously dumped from the baggage car on to the track, were standing staring at the rude, red painted shack which was the station. One of them was a rather stout, ruddy faced man who wore pince-nez from which dangled a silk ribbon. They seemed to rest very insecurely on his nose and he held them up with one hand, much like a lady handling a lorgnette, as he took in the uninviting prospect. His companion, younger by many years, was also fair and rather tall, a thin, sharp featured man of about thirty, with light hair and wistful blue eyes. He appeared to be a bit timid and bewildered while his older companion had the attitude of being generally outraged by his surroundings. In the meantime the box car had rolled, after being cut out at the siding, some distance farther up before the train had come to a stop, to a point before the station where its brakeman had stopped it and dived, on the run, to catch the train before it gathered headway. The third visitor was striding with an easy, swaying walk, even in his high heeled boots, toward the car out of whose open door a horse poked an intelligent head over the bar which imprisoned him.

Curly Bill came up to the passengers. His wondering eye took in the costumes which were utterly strange to him. They wore knickerbockers, unknown at that day in the West, and their ankles, stout in the case of the older man, thin in that of the younger, were encased in gaiters. Their Norfolk jackets had, also, an exotic look. The elder man, turning his close shaven face upon Bill, barked a question.

"I say, my man, where is the inn?"

"The which?" asked Bill. "Come again!"

"The inn," repeated the man impatiently. "The hotel, you know."

Bill scratched his head, lifting by the vizor the uniform cap he wore as a sole concession to his officialdom.

"Oh-h!" he drawled as though enlightened. "The hotel, says you? Yes, sir. Now, which hotel was you thinkin' of patronizin', sir?"

"The best one, please," said the tourist shortly. "And a conveyance, if you don't mind."

"Lord bless you, I don't mind," said Bill. "Nothin' riles me, which is why I'm trusted with this here important job. Now you was askin' fer the best hotel, was you? And a conveyance, says you?"

"A conveyance."

"How many?" interrogated Bill in a tone asking enlightenment as one would have said, in another region, "I beg your pardon".

"One will be sufficient," said the stranger.

"Is that all you want?" said Bill thankfully. "One. That ought to be easy. But jest what all do you indicate by this here conveyance you mention? I rise to inquire out o' pure ignorance."

"A conveyance. A vehicle," said the man.

The younger tourist stood uncomfortably, his thin and sensitive face a bit flushed. He caught the note of ridicule in Bill's stolid attitude.

"I say," he said timidly, "Mr. Wilde, you know, means a carriage of some sort, if you don't mind. A cab or something to take us to a hotel or inn if there's such a thing around here. I must say it doesn't look promising," he added with a rather worried glance at the endless vista of wilderness. "We booked for Cuesta, you know, and they put us off here, but perhaps they made a mistake."

Bill caught the apologetic tone and his manner changed instantly.

"Why, sure, sonny!" he said cordially. "This is Cuesta. All there is of it. How ever you come to elect it beats me, though. As fer hotels, son, there ain't no such. But I reckon I can fix you up, if you don't mind bachelor livin' until the train comes along tomorrow mornin'. You can catch that out o' here and go wherever you were headin' originally."

"But," said Mr. Wilde indignantly, "this is the place we were seeking. Isn't this a station? And do you mean to tell me that your railroads list stopping places where there is nothing more than this wilderness? Is this the American idea of humor, sir?"

"I reckon not," said Bill meekly, looking around him. "Leastways I don't see nothin' funny about it. However, I'm only the agent here and not responsible fer the railroad's comicalities. Here you are, sir, and I reckon you'll have to make the best of it."

SAM HASBROOK, having led his horse down a loading gangway, was coming toward them with the animal behind him. He was whistling softly to himself and his hat was a little back on his head and his gentle smile in evidence. The young Englishman eyed Sam's tall and slim form with a sort of wondering envy and his gaze was a little startled as it fell on the sagging cartridge belt and the holster from which peeped the brown handle of a gun.

Mr. Wilde, however, was indignant and oblivious of the newcomer.

"But I shan't make the best of it," he asserted. "I shall write to your employers about it, sir. We were led to believe that this was the nearest rail point to our destination, and we discover that we are set down in a howling wilderness. I consider that a fraud perpetrated upon us. And actionable, sir, if there is any law in this country."

"Maybe so," said Bill. "However, you tell it to Sweeney. I ain't runnin' the road."

"I shall certainly go to Mr. Sweeney, if that is his name," said Mr. Wilde. "I have never encountered such a situation. I would never have believed it possible."

But the young man seemed to have some understanding. He spoke deprecatingly.

"I've no doubt that this gentleman has nothing to do with it, Mr. Wilde," he asserted. "But it seems rather discouraging. Certainly we understood that this was the nearest point to our goal. Perhaps you can inform us. We are looking for the Rancho Negro in a place called Black Cañon."

"Hell's delights!" said Bill. "Now you're shoutin'. Sure I can help you. You're lookin' fer Stinkin' Jerry. Wilde! I ought to have remembered that name after seein' it on that letter. Well, now, you're all right, strangers. All you got to do, to git to Stinkin' Jerry, is to head out thataway and keep on goin' fer fifty miles or so, when you'll come right into the Elkhorn Mountains, and there you can hunt around until you run on to Black Cañon. After that it ain't but a step to Harmony Run and Jerry's shebang."

"My word!" said Mr. Wilde helplessly. "Fifty miles! Across this desert! And who is this extraordinary character—this—er—Stinking Jerry? We are seeking the Honorable—or I should rather say—Sir Gerald Cowper, Viscount Maudley. Can you, by any chance, direct us to him?"

"Well, well!" said Bill again. "If that don't beat time! Viscount—what was that you said? Maudley? A viscount is one of them lords, now, ain't he? And Stinkin' Jerry is a sure enough lord! Don't it beat hell?"

"But how can we reach him?" shouted the exasperated solicitor.

"Now," said Bill, with deep regret, "that I cain't tell you nohow, not knowin' whether he headed up or headed down; likewise not knowin' what kind o' life you all have led yourselves. You see, strangers, Stinkin' Jerry, alias Viscount Maudley, elects to pass in his checks recent and to wing his way aloft. Or, to speak more to the Book, he's probably forkin' coal fer the devil right this minute. To speak briefly, gents, Stinkin' Jerry is dead!"

The two strangers received this news blankly but without any signs of distress. The younger spoke—

"But he had a son, did he not?"

"Sure," said Bill. "He's still on deck as far as I know. You aimin' to visit him?"

"If we may," said the young man.

And at this, Sam, standing nearby, spoke up.

"I'm going that way," he said. "Glad to take you along."

CHAPTER III

A SHOOTING MATCH

MR. WILDE was by this time almost speechless, but this interruption served to give him a new lease on life, or at least on speech. He pivoted on his gaitered shoes and eyed the newcomer severely.

"And may I ask," said he, "who you may be, sir?"

"Nobody much, to speak of," said Sam cheerfully. "Name is Hasbrook, if it is of interest to you."

Mr. Wilde was about to state that it was of not the slightest interest to him but the young man broke in quickly.

"Thank you, Mr. Hasbrook," said he, smiling with a sort of deprecatory gratitude. "I am afraid that my friend, Mr. Wilde, and myself—I am Athelstane Cowper, by the way—are a bit at sea in a strange environment. If I understand your offer of aid, we are extremely grateful to you for it and gladly accept."

"Don't mention it," said Sam.

Mr. Wilde was muttering aside that it was folly to take up with any chance stranger to whom they had not been properly introduced. Curly Bill, still gaping wonderingly, murmured "Athelstane! Oh, Papa!" when the young man mentioned his name. But neither Mr. Cowper nor Sam showed any perturbation beyond the former's evident diffidence.

"We seem to be at a loose end," resumed Mr. Cowper. "We rather took it for granted, without sufficient inquiry, I am afraid, that this—er—station, was our destination and but a step, so to say, from my cousin's rancho. However, it now appears that we were mistaken and if you can help us to correct the error we shall be in your debt."

"Anybody strange to this country would be likely to get balled up," said Sam. "You should have gone to Warner's Ford and taken the stage from there to Barton. At Barton you could have hired a man to drive you over the divide to Black Cañon. It would have taken you a couple or three days but you'd have been there, whereas, by coming this way, you aren't nowhere after you get here. However, I reckon we can straighten you out. Bill, what you got in the line of a conveyance for these gents?"

Bill winced.

"There you go, old-timer!" he complained. "Springin' them terms on me jest like these Britishers. I ain't got no conveyance nor no other kind of lift around here except the railroad. Next train stops on a flag at 9:37 tomorrer mornin'."

"Tell that to Sweeney," said Sam. "You have something here to get around on. What's that barn next your house and what do you keep in it? You have a horse or something."

"Nary a hoss," said Bill. "I ain't forked a hull in twenty years and I don't aim to in twenty more. Four or five years back I had an old skate around which I drove occasional to a buckboard, but sence he died on me I ain't had no *conveyance* whatever. When I takes a day off I hop the rattler and goes comfortable."

"Where's the buckboard?" barked Sam.

"The buckboard? Why, I reckon it's around somewhere. I was goin' to sell it but there never seemed to be no one around needin' that sort of vehicle. Seems to me it's stowed back there in the barn. But it ain't no good; wasn't much to brag about when I was usin' it and it's been standin' there without no grease nor nothin' fer goin' on five year."

"You can write all that in your biography," said Sam. "Show me where this one horse shay is and let me get at it."

Somewhat reluctantly, Bill led the way to his barn, which was hardly more than an open shed. Here behind a lot of débris reposed the buckboard, shrouded in dust and dirt, its shafts warped and its ancient wheels dished by the exposure to the desiccating air of the region. Sam commandeered the unwilling Bill remorselessly and, after grasping what he was about, Mr. Athelstane Cowper insisted on lending an awkward but willing hand to the unsavory job of unearthing the relic from its surroundings. But when the decrepit thing at last was rolled protestingly out into the open, he looked at it in dismay while Mr. Wilde rolled his eyes in exasperation.

"My word," said the latter, "the bally thing is rotten."

"It really doesn't look serviceable," admitted Cowper.

"We'll make it do," said Sam cheerfully. "A little work will fix it. Where's the harness?"

"Harness?" said Bill. "What's left of it is hangin' up somewheres in there."

Search revealed the remnants of a set of harness, of which the leather was old and cracked and hard, with some pieces missing. But Sam only whistled when he examined it. He then turned on the protesting Bill and drove him to fill the big watering trough for the stock across the tracks. He himself was busy removing the shrunken and warped wheels on which the tires sagged half off. He straightened the iron bands as best he could on the wheels, placed them in the water and weighted them with rocks. Then he rustled up some grease and went over the ancient wagon busily.

Cowper insisted on aiding him, and the two of them managed to get the body and axles of the wagon in fairly good shape. Then Sam turned to the harness and by dint of great ingenuity and a plentiful rubbing and soaping of the rusty old leather, he softened it up and strengthened it, adding from rope the missing bits. But all this took the greater part of the remaining hours of light and it was certain that they would not be able to leave that day, if at all. And Bill was bitter in his predictions that they would not leave—at least not by that mode of travel.

"You ain't got no hoss," he said with truth from his point of view. "Leastways you ain't got no drivin' hoss. This here cow hooter has a bronc with him, but you Britishers are due to get a new experience if you aim to travel behind a cowman's hoss hitched to a wagon. I ain't the one to discourage no one in nothin', but if I was you and some one suggests to me a ride behind a hoss like that hitched to a *conveyance* like this'n', I'd sure decline with thanks. You ask me and I'll tell you that if you git any distance with that outfit you-all will find yourselves left high and dry and afoot right out in the desert."

"You stick to railroadin' and let me alone," said Sam. "Go on and have your lady knock us up a mess of chuck and get these gents a bed to sleep in."

Mr. Wilde protested more than once, but he was overruled. Athelstane Cowper who, it appeared, had just completed a medical education and was entitled to be called "doctor," but who, for some reason unexplained at the time, had apparently forsaken any intention of practising his profession, fell in meekly and gratefully with the program Sam laid down and worked manfully at a very dirty and disagreeable job.

DURING the rather unsatisfactory meal which Mrs. Simpson prepared for them Curly Bill tried to pump the reticent Mr. Wilde, whose tendency to pompousness greatly amused him. But he got little information, nor did Dr. Cowper add much to it. They gathered that Cowper was a second or third cousin or something of the sort, to the Honorable Gerald Cowper, who they said was actually Viscount Maudley owing to the death of his father some months previously.

On mentioning the letter he had forwarded, Bill learned that it contained a notification to Cowper of his father's death and of his accession to the title. Wilde in turn became interrogative with much more success than Bill. To be sure, Bill knew nothing beyond the fact that Cowper was dead, having heard it with no details from some passing traveler. But he took the opportunity, as before he had with his wife, to expatiate at great length on the peculiarities and general worthlessness of the late viscount. To this all of them listened attentively, the Englishmen with what seemed an increasing gloom and alarm. Especially on the subject of the surviving son of the viscount did they appear interested, and when Bill described that hopeful young man at length there was an expression almost of dismay on the countenances of his audience.

"What a damnable situation!" commented Mr. Wilde to Dr. Cowper in a despairing aside. "And what's to be done about it?"

Dr. Cowper shook his head gloomily and had no answer. But Bill had a comment to make and made it.

"Appears to me," he said with a chuckle as he summed up the situation, "like the British aristocracy is sure in fer a shock when this new viscount comes bargin' in amongst 'em. Say, Sam, what all do you think that breed will look like at one of them there 'long tennis' parties drinkin' tea and wearin' a high hat? Say, do you git him with one o' them valleys follerin' him around and layin' out his overalls fer him and callin' him 'me Lud'? I'd sure give up my pension to be there when he comes on a-whoopin'."

"My word," said Mr. Wilde, "you don't mean to say that he will give vent to—er—war whoops and things like that?"

"I wouldn't put it past him," replied Bill.

Dr. Cowper remained gloomily silent and Mr. Wilde was in evident distress. Sam broke in to ask a question of his own, having hitherto had no part in the talk.

"Have you heard anything about Mr. Sturgis up there?" he demanded of the station master.

"No. What about him?" replied Bill. "Anything new about One Lung Pete?"

"My word," said Mr. Wilde under his breath. "What a barbarous name."

"Sturgis is dead," said Sam. "His daughter wrote down that he was poisoned."

"Huh?" said Bill in amazement. "Pizened! How come?"

"That's all I know," said Sam.

But Dr. Cowper was interested.

"Poisoned?" he ejaculated. "You mean he was murdered?"

Sam shook his head.

"*Quien sabe?*" he said. "Might have been an accident. Wolf bait, say, taken for sugar."

"Wolf bait?" The doctor was puzzled.

"Strychnine. They keep it around to

put on chunks of meat and lay it out where lobos can get it. However, I don't know a thing beyond the fact."

THEY retired early against a prompt start in the morning. The Englishmen slept in the rather frowzy bed Bill was able to supply them with, but Sam took to his bedroll and slept under the stars. In the morning Dr. Cowper remarked a trifle ruefully that he wished he had done the same, but Mr. Wilde denounced the accommodations wrathfully and threatened again to write his remonstrances to the mythical Sweeney recommended by Bill, whom Mr. Wilde assumed to be the responsible officer of the road.

The wagon wheels had swelled in the water and the tires appeared tight and the spokes firm enough. Some of the dish had been conquered by the weights Sam had put on the wheels. When they were mounted on the wagon again and well greased it seemed likely that they might serve their turn. Then came the question of packing. On the buckboard had to go Sam's warbag and saddle. In addition to these he managed to find room for the two gladstone bags and the rugs, but he would not permit anything else. Mr. Wilde was indignant at the thought of leaving the trunks. He admitted the necessity, but it seemed he did not trust Curly Bill to assume their guardianship, much to that worthy's indignation. But Sam assured him that they would be safe and would be shipped at once by express to a rendezvous where they could be recovered. Then Mr. Wilde fished out a heavy leather gun case almost as big as a trunk and solemnly proceeded to look about for a place in which to stow it.

"What's that?" asked Sam.

"My express rifle," said Mr. Wilde with dignity. He proceeded to display it with evident pride. It was, when put together, a small cannon, beautifully made and mounted, but with a bore of enormous caliber. "A gunsmith in London selected it for me as suitable to the country into which we were going."

"He must have made a mistake," said Sam, examining the weighty affair carefully. "He thought you was going to war, I reckon, not to Arizona. Did you ever shoot this thing?"

"Not as yet," said Mr. Wilde. "There has been no occasion. But I may say without boasting that I am a fair shot. I have bragged my dozen brace many a time on the Maudley shooting."

"Brace of what?" asked Sam.

"Of partridge, sir!"

"With this thing?" asked Sam, amazed.

"Certainly not, sir. With a shotgun."

Sam was relieved.

"There ain't much call for a gun like that in this country," he explained kindly. "Mostly the biggest game we have is deer and that gun would blow a fair sized buck into hash. You better ship it with the trunks."

Mr. Wilde opened his mouth to remonstrate indignantly but, whether it was Sam's kindly tone, without semblance of ridicule, or whether the accumulation of experiences had suddenly broken his resistance, he suddenly wilted and helplessly surrendered the big weapon which was carefully deposited with the other superfluous luggage. And then, to emphasize his defeat, he rather mournfully extracted from the hip pocket of his knickerbockers a revolver of British type and silently handed that to Sam. Curly Bill, who had sardonically watched all this as he leaned against a post, shook with silent mirth. Blushing a bit painfully, Dr. Cowper also produced a pistol and held it out. Sam took the two weapons and turned them over. Bill cut off from a large and poisonous looking plug a mouthful of tobacco and inserted it into his cheek, spitting contemptuously on the desert sands.

"I dare say," said Dr. Cowper apologetically, "that we are making rather fools of ourselves in our ignorance. These things now—we rather thought they were worn commonly here, and the talk of a gentleman we met on the train confirmed the impression, though I think now that he must have been pulling our legs."

"Yes," said Mr. Wilde mournfully. "He was a frightfully bloodthirsty ruffian. Had killed no end of people according to his narrative. He said he was known far and wide as the Demon of the Mountains. But I believe the name he gave was Colonel Hilary Brown."

"I know the guy," said Bill with ineffable scorn. "He travels out o' Kansas City fer a shoe outfit and he ain't never killed anything but liquor. Say, you pilgrims better leave that hardware behind, too. First thing you know you'll be shootin' yourselves. Folks that carry six-guns ought to know how to use 'em. Ain't that so, cowboy?"

Sam nodded tolerantly. He was still looking at the revolvers. They were fine weapons, though not quite so trim and deadly in appearance as the slim weapon he himself wore. They were of heavy caliber and solidly constructed.

"That's true enough, up to a point," he said. "Now, I reckon you are pretty good with that hogleg you wear, Bill. An old-timer like you ought to be."

"Me?" said Bill, self-consciously. "Oh, I ain't no wonder, but I reckon I can spit smoke right smart when I have to."

"I'll bet you can," said Sam. "Now, if you folks don't mind, suppose you try your hand with these things. We'll let Bill shoot and see how you make out against him."

Bill guffawed and pulled the weapon he wore from its holster, complacently spinning the cylinder.

"Come on, me Luds!" he ejaculated. "I'll shoot you two bits against a dime a shot. Make it a sporting proposition."

The Englishmen looked rather dismayed.

"But I say," began Dr. Cowper, "that would be—" and then he caught a wink from Sam which he did not understand, but he was, after all, rather "quick on the uptake" and he fell in with their friend's evident desire. "But if it's a sporting affair, we are game, though we don't assume to be expert."

"There's a tin can over there, Bill," said Sam. "Turn loose your wolf and show us how it's done."

Bill smirked and chuckled and threw down on the can. He was showing off and he assumed a nonchalance in his shooting that was designed to impress. With seeming carelessness he pulled trigger rapidly and sent his bullets streaming toward the can. The result was a lot of noise, a stirring of dust all around the target and not a single hit. When the smoke cleared away, Bill stood for a moment uneasily looking at the unmoved tin can.

"There you are, gents," said he, with an attempt at tolerant superiority. "I'm givin' you a handicap. I cut the dust all around her and never teched her. Now it's up to you."

The doctor shot. He aimed and he handled the gun well. He evidently had the knack, gathered from frequent use of a shotgun, of holding instinctively on a target. He sent the can leaping with two out of five direct hits. Bill was chagrined. But when the despised Mr. Wilde, shooting deliberately but surely, put four out of five bullets into the riddled can, he wilted.

"Hell!" he said as he counted out a dollar and a half and paid it over. "It's another British outrage! This ain't no place fer me! I'm too innercent!"

Sam gravely waved the guns back to their hip pockets.

"You'll do, gents," said he. "Maybe that kind of shootin' wouldn't take a prize, but it will qualify. And it's a fact, discounting all the stuff that the Demon of the Mountains fed you with, that a six-shooter will probably be a handy thing to have around up where we are going. And those are two pretty good guns, though not quite the style we used around here."

"I noticed that," said Dr. Cowper. He and Mr. Wilde were flushed and pleased at their showing. "They are British service revolvers, but I dare say yours is much more efficient—"

The ubiquitous Bill broke in sourly.

"Gents," he said, "it ain't the gun that counts, but the hand on the trigger.

And believe me when I say you may be findin' it out. See that there poster?" He pointed to a broadside nailed to his station wall. "Cast yer eye on it. The guy that's wanted there can shoot gnats right outen the air at twenty yards on the wing. And they do allow that he ain't, at this moment, so darn' far away from the Elkhorn as he might be. If you run into him you're likely to see shootin' that is shootin', providin' you're alive to look."

Mr. Wilde and Cowper examined the broadside with its photographs of a handsome young fellow. The lurid text screamed murder at them, belying the picture. Sam had already seen it.

"My word!" said Mr. Wilde incredulously. "Pueblo Pete! Extraordinary name, what?"

"And an extraordinary devil," said Sam grimly. He said no more, but ordered the start.

Contrary to Bill's prediction, his horse when harnessed, though he rubbed his nose reproachfully on his master's sleeve, struck off nicely into a round trot, dragging the buckboard behind him.

CHAPTER IV

BLOOD ON THE MOON

THE BUCKBOARD, all things considered, held up remarkably well and Sam Hasbrook's horse proved himself as good a driver as could have been desired. As a result, after nearly ten hours of practically steady progress, the party found themselves, that evening, almost at the foot of the mountain range fifty miles from Cuesta.

The journey had been one of discomfort and wretched monotony for the two Englishmen, but they bore it, on the whole, remarkably well. Mr. Wilde made some disparaging references to scenery and climate and talked rather vaguely of writing to some one or something about it, but Dr. Cowper was philosophical and interested. The sun burned them, the alkali dust stung them and increased their thirst and the old buckboard, creaking and groaning under the weight and its rapid progress, was a most uncomfortable vehicle.

During the journey, other than comment on what little there was to see and note about the vast, dreary desert plain, the Englishmen had little to say. After their kind, they were reserved and reticent about their own affairs and Sam made no effort to pump them. He informed them that he intended to camp for the night at a spring in the outer foothills of the Elkhorn Range and complete the journey the next day—that is, if they had luck. The "luck" referred to the buckboard, though they had had better luck with it than they expected.

Nevertheless, about a mile and a half from the spring that ancient vehicle gave up the ghost without preliminary warning. The dried and imperfectly straightened wheels, shrinking once more under the burning sun and aridity, suddenly dished, two wheels at once, and their tires rolled from the rims and buckled. The heavy laden bed came crashing to earth and the slats splintered. In no time at all the buckboard was as complete and finished a wreck as the legendary one horse shay, leaving them afoot with a heavy load of baggage in the midst of the plain, which, while now by no means as arid and barren as it had been, was still a dismal prospect to the two foreigners.

Sam, however, surveyed the débris cheerfully.

"We really weren't entitled to as much as this," he commented. "For five hours I've been expecting that crate to go back on us. Well, we're almost there and I reckon we can make the rest of the way without much trouble."

Mr. Wilde examined the landscape in the rays of a sinking sun. Behind and all around them were sand and scanty bunch grass, cacti and yucca and sage. Ahead loomed the hills, plunging upward quite suddenly into rugged and brown slopes cut by deeply scored gullies in which, here and there, grew black patches of timber. Lines of lighter green ran down them, marking to an experienced eye the courses of streams. But the scene was utterly deserted of any life, human or animal, and the mountains, if anything, presented a more terrifying aspect than did the plain. One could see the stark simplicity of the desert; grasp its naked threat at a glance. But the mountains were mysterious and concealing, hiding whatever dangers lurked among them.

"It's up to us to do a little work," said Sam with a grin.

"Most distressing," said Mr. Wilde. "A beastly country, if you'll pardon my saying so. I take it that we must abandon our luggage and strike out for some inhabited place as best we may."

"I'm afraid there are no inhabitants to amount to anything until we get where we are going," said Sam with a chuckle. "It's a case of walking a piece and—gosh, how I hate it! But it might be a whole lot worse."

"Could it, really?" said Mr. Wilde in considerable doubt. "My word! Lost on a desert in this supposedly civilized country. If we return safely they will never credit this adventure in London."

"Shucks," said Sam, "you'll have more to tell than this before you get back."

He was busily removing from the horse the harness which bound it to the wreckage. Next he dragged forth his saddle and tossed it to the horse's back. The horse was a little tired but still capable of going a considerable distance. Dr. Cowper, immensely interested and eager, strove to help and at Sam's direction he dragged rugs and bags from the bed of the buckboard. These, with pieces of harness and rope, Sam securely strapped on his saddle, the bags evenly balanced and slung on either side. That left water bags, some provisions and Sam's light warbag, which last was slung to Sam's shoulders. The only burdens the Englishmen carried were the water bags, which were now almost empty.

"But, I say, Mr. Hasbrook," remonstrated Dr. Cowper. "This is a bit too much. You are carrying it all. You and the horse. We're not entirely decrepit, you know."

Sam grinned infectiously.

"Of course not," he said. "I'm keeping you fresh so that you can take up the burden when I give out. Git on there—"

He slapped the horse with the end of the hackamore rein which he held, and the beast started. The men followed. The heat of the day had given place to cooler weather, now that the sun was sinking behind the mountains. A slight breeze mitigated the dead air of the plain. The sand was not as soft as it looked and the growth was not thick enough to be a serious handicap. The lightly laden Englishmen stepped along with relief after the long, cramping confinement of the buckboard. In a very short time they had climbed farther into the foothills and soon after had slid down into a grassy, willow lined little valley through which a cheerful stream plunged. Here Sam made camp and soon had a cheerful fire going and food cooking.

THE WALK had brought them all much closer together and there was a distinct indication of thawing even on the part of Mr. Wilde. He became almost chatty, and soon, as they rested about the fire after a fairly good meal, he brought up the subject of their mission.

"I take it," said he, "that you are well acquainted with the inhabitants of this extraordinary region, Mr. Hasbrook?"

"Never knew there were any until a few days ago," said Sam. "By the way, if you don't mind, I'm not used to titles. Most folks call me Sam. We sort of simplify life out this away, you know, and it saves time and trouble to shorten things up. And if it's just the same to you I'll lead the way. Doc and Judge. I reckon those titles will sit as well as any on you unless you've got objections."

Mr. Wilde chuckled, rather to Sam's surprise.

"I say, that's rather good, you know," he said. "But I'm not a judge, you know. I am a solicitor."

"Same as a lawyer, isn't it?" asked Sam. "All our lawyers either aim to be judges or actually get there eventually. We kind of get the habit of calling them that whether they are or not."

"Somehow," said Mr. Wilde, "it conveys rather a pleasing sense of informality. By all means let it be Judge then, Mr. Sam—"

"You're hardly on to the game, Judge," said Sam. "The 'mister' is plumb superfluous."

Mr. Wilde blushed and then grinned whole-heartedly.

"I begin to understand," he said. "But you'll pardon me if I feel a little insular diffidence at first. I'm an elderly person with fixed ideas. Would you mind if I amended the program a bit and compromise on 'Samuel'?"

"Bless you," said Sam. "You'll get me laughed at with that, but I don't mind it in a good cause."

"I'll rise fully to the occasion myself," said Dr. Cowper, beaming. "I can do it, as being nearer of an age with you, you understand. But it really is a pity I haven't a more appealing name myself. You couldn't very well familiarize 'Athelstane', now, could you?"

"It sure would be a chore," said Sam. "But 'Doc' serves the purpose. Now, Judge, you were asking about the inhabitants. As I said, there aren't many and I don't know much more about them than you do. My information is second hand."

He proceeded to inform them briefly of what he knew. Both of them listened intently to the short recital.

"Possibly our missions may have no connection," said Mr. Wilde when he had finished. "Yet it strikes me that there are coincidences which need explaining. The only inhabitants of this section, you say, are my client and his son—I call him my client though he has not retained me — and this — er — caretaker and his daughter. Remarkable thing, by the way, that a girl should isolate herself in this beastly wilderness. She must be a strong character. You tell me that your man, an invalid, has had trouble with the late Viscount Maudley, as I must call him. I can very well believe it, knowing what I do. We may take it, I assume, that there was a sort of vendetta between them."

"According to gossip, there was," said Sam.

"You hear that Mr. Sturgis is dead—poisoned—though there are no details. A bit later, arriving independently, we also hear that the Viscount Maudley is also dead. It's a rather singular situation. I will not say that the death of Cowper causes us any grief. He was not a character to inspire any such emotion. But—it adds to the complications."

"It does indeed," said Cowper feelingly.

"LET ME put the matter frankly before you, Samuel," said Mr. Wilde as Sam listened inscrutably. "It stands this way. Many years ago the Honorable Gerald Cowper, second son of the late Viscount Maudley—a very honorable name in England—disgraced himself and his family in ways which I will not stop to describe. His father got rid of him by sending him to the far bounds of the earth and making him an allowance. He came to your country and, I judge, did not mend his ways. Still, they were rid of him, and he gave little worry to any one for a long time.

"You must understand, Samuel, that among the outstanding traits of the Honorable Gerald, there was one which was overmastering. He had a certain vindictiveness amounting almost to a mania. To satisfy his sense of wrongs he would go to any length, even the most grotesque. I take it, also, that he utterly lacked the chief trait of the Cowpers, which is a certain high regard for their own dignity and a pride which they hold very dear. Now it appears that Gerald, nursing his injuries and knowing very well what would hurt most those who he imagined had injured him, determined to strike at that pride in an effort at revenge. He took a most grotesque and yet effective way. He married an Indian woman—a savage."

"A lousy trick," said Sam.

"Exactly. Yet for a long time he kept this fact secret, perhaps even hoping for the contingency that finally eventuated. His elder brother, heir to the estates and title—they are entailed, if you understand the term—"

"I've heard tell of it," said Sam. "Eldest son gets the whole loot. This isn't the first time that some rawhider from the sagebrush has fallen heir to a lordship. Every now and then we find we've been entertainin' nobility unawares. But mostly they are all right when you know 'em. This one seems to be a regular sidewinder."

"Exactly, though other than that the term means something unpleasant, I am not familiar with it. A scoundrel, I should say. In any event, finally the elder brother's health failed seriously. There was no issue of his marriage and his wife died early. It became evident that the Honorable Gerald was to succeed to the title and all the entailed estates. This news was duly conveyed to him and elicited an astounding response. He wrote back, exultantly and insolently, with no trace of family pride or filial decency.

"He rejoiced at the news and he exulted at the news that he, in turn, had to convey. This was, briefly, that he looked forward eagerly, not only to taking his place among the peers of England but that he had provided a consort who would do full credit to the exalted position she was to occupy. He described her. He had married, as I said, an Indian—a squaw. By her he had a son, a halfbreed, who, in the course of events, would be the eighth Viscount Maudley.

"The old viscount was almost prostrated. There was no help for it, since at this time his eldest son died before proceedings to break the entail could be started. Without the consent of the new heir they fell through, of course. The old viscount immediately broke all relations with Gerald, stopped his allowance and never afterward mentioned his name.

"A few months ago, the old viscount paid the debt of nature. I, as solicitor for the family, notified Gerald in due course. That was the letter of which the station master spoke. It was delayed in reaching Gerald, as he explained, and now it appears that he must have died within a short time after receiving it.

"In the meantime, however, the situation had appeared to us as being almost unbearable. Dr. Cowper, here, who is a grandson of the old viscount's younger brother, and so a cousin of Gerald's and, but for this son, heir to title and estates, especially felt that the situation must lead to a deplorable scandal. On talking matters over with me, he and I came to the conclusion, finally, that we must leave no stone unturned to prevent what seemed a calamity. To that end we came to this country, intent on examining records and making sure that this Indian woman was actually married to Gerald. We hoped, of course, to discover that, at worst, his marriage had been so loosely contracted, if in fact it was a marriage at all, that the English courts would not recognize it. But we failed there. The marriage had been duly solemnized by a priest, at a mission, over twenty years ago. A year later there was the record of the birth of the son and it had been properly recorded in the records of the county."

Sam pricked up an ear.

"That's damned funny," he said. "For this reason: at that date they didn't bother to keep records of the sort in this country. You say they had this?"

"They certainly did. The record gave the name of the child, date of birth and the place where it occurred. That was the record, with the name of the attending midwife, some unpronounceable Indian cognomen. A very irregular certificate, but since they seem to keep their records of that sort in a most haphazard fashion, it was better than most."

"It was mighty queer that he entered any record back that far," said Sam. "Shows he was taking precautions even then. I don't suppose you found many such entries at that date."

"Now you mention it, I did not. The clerk even scoffed at their being any as remote as that, but when I insisted on a search he was positively astonished on finding this single entry filed away with a lot of miscellaneous documents. However, there it was, put there, as it seemed, to destroy our last faint hope."

"Now," said Sam, thoughtfully, "that's mighty queer, that entry."

"Not half so queer as the fact that a halfbreed Indian is now Viscount Maudley," said Dr. Cowper bitterly. "But there is nothing to do but recognize the fact. In a last faint hope of appealing to whatever remnants of better nature my cousin might retain, we decided while we were here to come to see him and determine if something could not be done to stave off the tragedy. Probably nothing could have been accomplished. In any event it is too late now. The son is Viscount Maudley."

"And we might better turn and go home," said Mr. Wilde sadly. "An honored name must be bedraggled, but we can do nothing."

"We might as well continue and see just what sort of savage is head of the family," said Dr. Cowper. "If only to know the worst."

"And," said Mr. Wilde with a sigh, "I presume we should, in common decency, bring the fellow home and endeavor to aid him in his first steps in his new environment. But—it all has a most sinister aspect."

Sam merely whistled thoughtfully.

"It sure is a hole," he admitted. "And, gentlemen, I can't help thinking that the hole is a bit deeper than we yet know. There's Miss Sturgis up there and she hollered for help, though I take it she isn't one to yelp before she is hurt. I want to see that girl and get the facts from her and I'd advise that, before you go introducing this Injun viscount to court, you come along with me and hear what she has to say."

"I'm afraid nothing can be said," remarked Mr. Wilde.

"Judge, you wait and see. Something can be said and that is that a couple of folks have died under mysterious circumstances. We'll at least find out how they died."

Mr. Wilde looked at Sam with something like fear.

"You mean—murder?"

"I mean there's blood on the moon," said Sam grimly.

CHAPTER V

ON GUARD

THEY made an early start in the morning, laden much as they had been the day before. But almost immediately they entered mountainous country, widely different from that they had already traversed. After some few miles of steady walking in which they ascended steadily, they finally crossed the summit of a high ridge and began a descent of it on the other side through a fairly heavy growth of timber. The slope was not excessive but, looking ahead up the gulf which the ridge bounded, they contemplated a scene of wilder grandeur where the tree clad slopes narrowed and grew more abrupt.

But below them ran a rather wide valley, and in the valley a stream rolled and rushed on its way out to the plains. It was not a large river, but it carried a respectable head of water and its current was rapid and broken. When the travelers had descended almost to the bottom of the valley they came upon a rough trail, not very distinct, which ran the length of the valley—or cañon, as it soon became.

Trudging patiently along this pathway, they found themselves once more ascending, but this time following the course of the stream which Sam explained was the Elkhorn River. The trail meandered along the slopes hemming in the waters, and those slopes became ever more rugged and steep until they were at last in a veritable gorge whose granite sides, sometimes bare and forbidding, and sometimes clothed thickly with tall pines, closed in on them like walls. Now the trail climbed high above the waters which showed like a silver ribbon below, and again it dipped sharply down to wander easily along terraced benches not more than a few feet from the torrent.

For more than ten miles they progressed steadily, and during all that time there was no sign other than the deserted trail that a human being had ever set foot in this region. They met no one nor saw any signs of life beyond a flight of birds and an occasional glimpse of some startled deer roused from its daytime siesta in the brush. The mountains still towered ahead of them, and they climbed steadily upward until the air grew so rarefied as to oppress the lowland bred Englishmen.

Ahead of them they now heard the roar of falling waters, and the trail once more soared high along the granite sides of the gorge. Quite suddenly it slid around a jutting buttress of rock and ran out upon a wide, retreating slope, much more gentle than any they had yet encountered, pleasantly turfed with grass and wild flowers, with big patches of aspen dotted here and there upon it. The river they had followed swung away to the right and to the left ahead of them another, smaller stream tumbled down a series of cascades in white and foaming turmoil before it mingled with the greater stream.

"Harmony Run," explained Sam, with a nod toward the smaller stream.

The trail swerved abruptly around the big, sloping meadow and followed the tributary. High above the cataract they strode along the long curve of the mountain shoulder and very soon swung far enough around it to get a far flung view of the country ahead of them.

The slope they were on overlooked a pleasant scene. The vale below, into which the meadow sloped, was rather wide and level, confined on their side by rounded and rather barren slopes but on the opposite faced by high and steeply cut cliffs of whitish gray rock. These ran back apparently for miles, closing in upon the opposite slopes which in turn grew more abrupt as they retreated, until some miles away the stream emerged from what seemed to be another precipitous gorge. Here and there along the scored and ragged cliff, at various heights, silvery spouts of water sprayed out of holes and crevices and went tumbling down to join the creek at the foot of the cliff.

At one point, about a mile from where they stood, the creek swung out two or three hundred yards into the grassy level of the valley, leaving between its banks and the cliff a wide and verdant bench. On this terrace, not far from the creek, stood a cabin of about four rooms. There was also the usual fenced corral nearby and a small barn. From the cabin, crossing the stream and cutting across the valley, ran a trail which finally ascended the slopes on the other side and was lost to view.

"That's the Sturgis place," said Sam as they stood gazing down on the pleasant picture in its magnificent setting. "But it seems mighty quiet."

WITH some misgiving he led the way downward and in another twenty minutes they found themselves leaping from rock to rock across the stream. But when Cowper, stumbling on a slippery boulder, almost fell, and caught himself only when his hand, outstretched, entered the shallow water, he found it, to his surprise, distinctly warm. The horse, stooping to drink, also was startled and snorted suspiciously and flung his head sharply up. Then he gingerly stooped his muzzle and sniffed the water before attempting to drink.

"That's the springs up there," explained Sam when Cowper's exclamation apprised him of the latter's astonishment. "There is a lot of limestone country up here and it is all undermined with underground water which is warm. This creek is fed entirely by springs like that coming out of the rock for miles along here. My company located this place as a good one for waterpower a long time ago, got title to this valley and a site for a dam, and built that house and put a tenant in it so as to hold it against any attempt to challenge their title. The tenant was Sturgis."

"But why don't they build the dam?" asked the doctor.

"No market for power around here and won't be for many a long year. But sooner or later my people figure they'll need this head of water, so they are holding on to it. There's been no opposition—except from your viscount, and he hasn't amounted to much more than an annoyance until lately."

"Where's his rancho?" asked Mr. Wilde.

"Must be up that cañon where it narrows and gets steep. He raises goats and I reckon that is about all he could raise up in that gully. According to rumor he raises them because it's considered a sort of lowdown occupation around here, and he selects it as much to discredit white folks as anything. Injuns and Mexicans have a monopoly on that profession, generally. It's worse than raising sheep."

The Englishmen were a little at sea concerning this distinction, but they gathered that there were social distinctions of a sort even in this wild and remote land, though they did not comprehend why goat raising should be more reprehensible than another occupation. They were approaching the house now and their attention was directed to it. It was a well built frame and log structure, rather pretty in design, but it appeared to be deserted, though there was a horse in the corral which poked its head over the bars and whinnied recognition to Sam's beast of burden.

"Must be some one nearby," said Sam. "Wouldn't go and leave a horse shut up without feed. But where is she?"

He had stepped out from the brush and willows lining the creek and stood gazing at the silent house. But it did not remain silent. From its interior came the muffled crack of a rifle shot and a bullet cut into the brush behind Sam. The Englishmen uttered startled exclamations, but Sam took off his hat and waved it in his left hand while he held his right straight above his head with the palm toward the house. There followed a moment of silence and then the door of the house opened and a half hidden figure came to view behind it.

"Who are you?" came a very clear and determined voice. "Hospitality's suspended around here for the present and you'll excuse me if I ask you to stand there until I know you better. I can hear you if you talk loud."

Sam raised his voice.

"If you're Miss Sturgis," he said, "I'm the fair haired pilgrim the company sent up in answer to your note. My name's Hasbrook and I'm up here as reenforcements. Looks like you are standing siege."

"I'm at least taking no chances," replied the voice. "You don't look like a halfbreed, anyhow, so you can come ahead. Who are your friends?"

"Pilgrims looking for your neighbor. But they're hostile to breeds themselves and harmless to ladies."

"They look like a couple of things out of a show," remarked Miss Sturgis.

The party advanced, and the girl now stood in the door to receive them. She was slender, not more than twenty years old and very good looking in her short riding skirt and trim boots, with a heavy frame of hair around her tanned face. But there was a grim set to her mouth, and under her eyes were dark circles which told of anxiety and strain somewhat belying the flippancy of her remarks. She carried a light rifle in the crook of her elbow and her waist was spanned by a belt laden with long and deadly looking cartridges.

SHE STOOD aside to let them enter. Mr. Wilde eyed her curiously as he bowed to her and she returned the look with a straight scrutiny. Then Dr. Cowper stepped through and her gaze on him seemed faintly mirthful. He was staring at her intently but he suddenly flushed and dropped his gaze as he realized her amusement.

As for Sam, he had composedly led his horse to the corral and was now stripping it of packs and saddle.

"Got any hay?" he asked.

The girl stepped out and began to help him, showing him where the hay was kept in the barn. In a few moments he had fed his horse and turned it into the corral. Then he at last turned to the cabin. He and the girl had been almost casually impersonal during this contact. And as they entered the cabin together he spoke at last as casually and impersonally.

"Well," he said, "what's the lowdown, Miss Sturgis? The enemy bushwhacking you?"

"You can search me," said Miss Sturgis. "I don't know. To tell the truth, I'm as ignorant as a baby and I don't even know what to suspect. But that halfbreed gives me the willies, and I am not taking any chances as long as he's around."

"You refer to the present viscount?" asked Mr. Wilde. "But surely you may get protection. There must be some sort of authority even in this wilderness, Miss Sturgis."

"Is that fellow a viscount?" asked Miss Sturgis. "That's a good one. A goat-herding viscount! What's aristocracy coming to, I'd like to know. Send me an invitation when he gives his scalp dance in the Houses of Parliament, will you? But you were mentioning protection. Well, I could get all that I want but I don't want to be under obligation to any one.

"As far as that goes, I had the sheriff swarming all over the place several days ago, but he was useless. He'd been reading detective stories and he gave one of the silliest imitations of 'Old Sleuth' I ever imagined. He ended up by pinching poor old Juan Peralta and marching him off to the *cuartel* at Barton on the ground that he was the only *hombre* around here that was using wolf bait. Juan's as harmless as his own sheep and I told him so. But that didn't faze Old Sleuth! He said wolf bait did the deed and Juan was using wolf bait. And when I asked him when, if ever, had old Juan come over within ten miles of Harmony Run, he said there wasn't anything to prevent him doing it any time he took a notion. That was true enough, except that there was Jerry Cooper camping across the trail and he had threatened to shoot Juan if he ever got sight of him this side the divide. But I'm running on like a mill race and here you are without anything to eat. If you'll just sit still a minute—"

But Dr. Cowper, who had been watching her with an anxious eye, arose suddenly and took her by the arm. Sam also was looking at her closely. She was, indeed, running on like a mill race as she had said but her voice had grown slightly shrill and her face was flushed one moment and pale the next. The young doctor spoke solicitously and soothingly, but she suddenly backed away from him and tore her arm loose.

"Let me alone!" she cried. "I—I don't want to be—be touched!"

Dr. Cowper stood back helplessly. He was a very young doctor, not many years older than the girl. She stood tensely, as if at bay, staring at them all with wild eyes. Sam suddenly did something which surprised himself more than it did the others. He stepped quickly to her side and put an arm around her.

"Buck up, sis!" he said gruffly and kindly. "It's all over but the shouting. We're here to hold the fort for you."

Miss Sturgis at first started, as if to fight him off as she had the doctor, but something about the iron arm holding her so firmly—it's very hardness and strength, perhaps—had its effect on her overwrought nerves. Quite without preliminary she sank against Sam's shoulder and began to cry, dryly and harshly. Sam put up his other hand and held her cheek against his breast.

"That's right," he said. "Get it out of your system."

The young doctor looked on with a sort of wistful envy. Mr. Wilde fidgeted and cleared his throat and wiped his face with a handkerchief.

"Hum-hum," he said in agitation. "A great pity. Must have had a distressing time. Distressing indeed!"

But Miss Sturgis was made of strong fiber. Her sobs shook her for a time, during which Sam stood patiently holding her, with a half guilty realization that the action was not at all unpleasant. Her distress made him uncomfortable, yet he was in no hurry to see it depart. Yet gradually her agitation died away and at last, with a long drawn shiver, she raised her head and pulled to get away from him. He released her with some reluctance.

"You must think I'm a terrible flop," said she. "But I don't usually cling around masculine necks. I've simply got the heeby-jeebies."

"I beg pardon," said Mr. Wilde.

"It's all right, Judge," explained Sam. "Miss Sturgis means she was just throwing a little high-sterics. Well, well, it's all over now, I reckon. You just sit down and rest and let me loose to rustle the grub. Nothing to scare you now, anyhow."

"Maybe not," said Miss Sturgis with an uncertain laugh. "Let's hope so. But if you'll take that field glass there and turn it on the cliff about half a mile up the cañon and see if he's still there, maybe you'll think differently."

Sam took the glasses and went to the rear where he did as she requested, while she sat on a chair and dabbed at her eyes with a handkerchief. She drew a tiny vanity case from her jacket pocket and proceeded to repair the damage to her appearance, a procedure which rather astonished the Englishmen, who were not accustomed to encountering that sort of thing. But Miss Sturgis paid no heed whatever to them and only cast a surreptitious glance at Sam's back, which was turned to her, as though anxious only to conceal her preparations from him. When he turned around, her cosmetics were again in her pocket and she met his gaze demurely, though she did not lose the quick flash of relief and admiration that showed on his face as he observed the remarkable improvement in her color.

"There's a fellow sitting on a point of rock up there," said Sam. "He might be watching the place, but he isn't doing anything and he is too far away to be dangerous."

"He sits there most of the time," said Miss Sturgis, shivering a little. "Like a wolf! That's the viscount, or whatever you call him."

"What's he sitting there for?" demanded Sam.

"I'm not sure," said Miss Sturgis, "but I think he is waiting his chance to get me."

CHAPTER VI

FATHER AND SON

THE ENGLISHMEN crowded to the window and looked at the miniature, which was all they could see. They were somewhat stirred despite their racial apathy, feeling themselves excitingly enveloped in an atmosphere of primitive violence with all the attributes of a cinema. But the beautiful cañon remained serene and peaceful. The distant, dwarfed and indistinct figure high on the crown of the cliff seemed innocuous. Then, too, despite the girl's rather melodramatic declaration, it had been made almost flippantly and Sam seemed to take it with a matter-of-fact casualness that destroyed the effect of drama.

"But, I say," remarked Doctor Cowper, "you mean to say the fellow is stalking you to stage another murder? And your —er—sheriff, rides away leaving you unprotected, with a murderer at large?"

The girl shrugged her shoulders.

"If he hadn't ridden away," she said darkly, "I'd have chased him away. He's a fool. Besides, he's scared. And I don't know that there is any danger. It's just my nerves and now that you've come—"

She did not address this unfinished remark to any one in particular, but Sam somehow had a comfortable feeling that it referred to him more particularly and the feeling gave him pleasure. But he went on sedately preparing food and setting it on the table in the center of the room used as combined dining and living room.

"Grub pile," said he at last, and motioned them all to seats.

He seemed to take charge of the situation naturally. And, when they were all seated and attacking the homely fare he had provided, he plunged directly into the subject of most interest in a matter-of-fact tone:

"A little of the burgoo, Miss Sturgis? Help yourself to the spuds, Judge. I kind of gather that Injun Jim up there is bushwhacking you now and then, but I reckon he will lay low as long as this young army is around. And if he's going back to England to be invested with his robes and regalia with his folks, you can count on it that he won't pull any funny stuff as a preliminary. And now suppose you pitch in, taking your time to it, and give us the sign as you've been able to read it. What we know is a little less than rumor."

Instead of beginning her narrative in concise fashion Miss Sturgis irrelevantly appealed to Dr. Cowper.

"Is he really a viscount?" she asked him. "How awfully funny!"

Cowper hardly saw the humor in it, but he confirmed the fact without evidence of mirth. And, instead of laughing, Miss Sturgis seemed pensive.

"You know," she said, "I feel rather sorry for the poor fellow. I know enough about him to know that he's led a dog's life through no fault of his own. It's bad enough to be a halfbreed, but when you add to it such a situation as this, one can't help but sympathize. And I've never felt that there was any real harm in young Jerry—until lately. Even now it seems hard to think—"

"What? After the scoundrel had murdered your father and his own!" ejaculated the indignant Mr. Wilde. "It should be easy to ascribe anything to him after that, I should say."

"But who said he killed them?" exclaimed Miss Sturgis unexpectedly. "As a matter of fact he didn't—couldn't have done so. Good heavens, do you suppose Old Sleuth Mackay, if he'd half an excuse, wouldn't have dragged him at the end of a rope to the *cuartel?* No, he had to content himself with old Juan Peralta who wouldn't murder a fly or anything but a loafer—"

"A what? You mean an idler—a vagrant? But surely even here—"

"Even here idleness is no crime, Judge," Sam interposed, "and many consider it a virtue. She means a wolf—Mexico lobo, colloquially corrupted to loafer. They set out chunks of meat covered with strychnine to poison 'em when they get too thick and damagin' to the lamb crop. And if you'll excuse the little lecture in local customs and idioms, we can assume that we know all this and that, somehow, Mr. Sturgis got a dose of strychnine intended for a wolf. I take it this Juan Peralta is a sheepman and a *Mexicano*, possessing strychnine, and as such an object of suspicion. Therefore, Mackay, the sheriff, runs him in. You say that he's not guilty?"

"Of course not," said Miss Sturgis. "He ranges ten miles from here and every rancher has strychnine—only he's a Mexican, which is like being a colored man down South, automatically suspected. Besides, he was most friendly with father."

"In any case," put in Dr. Cowper, "I don't see how you can be sure that it was strychnine. I understand there was no medical man at hand, or am I wrong?"

"You're right as rain," said Miss Sturgis. "There wasn't a sawbones within fifteen miles and he didn't get here at all. I did what I could with the few eggs the chickens had laid and the coyotes hadn't stolen, but it wasn't enough."

"Can you describe the symptoms?" asked the doctor gently.

Miss Sturgis shuddered, but held herself under command and, in a rather strained, low voice, complied. At the end of her statement Dr. Cowper nodded.

"It must have been strychnine," he said. "And that is a point gained. If one knows the medium of the crime it should not be hard to discover the perpetrator."

Miss Sturgis, whose agitation had returned after her ordeal, beat a slender brown hand on the table in exasperation.

"The medium!" she snapped. "Good heavens, what has that to do with it? I've told you every rancher in the country keeps strychnine handy for wolves. It's as common as rock salt. They didn't arrest old Peralta because he had strychnine but because he was a greaser."

"But why on earth didn't they arrest—er—my cousin?" stammered the doctor.

"Because he wasn't here. Because, if you must know, he was clear over to San Angelo at the mission doing some sort of ceremony having to do with his marriage. And he did get married there and came back only after it was all over."

"What?" growled Sam, frowning.

"My word! Married!" ejaculated Wilde, stupefied. "To an Indian?" he added mournfully when his stupefaction had passed.

Dr. Cowper sat glumly silent.

"To an Indian? Not on your life," said Miss Sturgis emphatically. "To a regular stunning señorita as white as you or I. It's a lucky thing for him that the *Mexicanas* don't draw the color line as strictly as we do. Even so, that is one of the queerest things about it all. Jerry's no beauty, even if he has a title. He'd hardly appeal even to a *Mexicana*."

"Bless my soul," said Mr. Wilde helplessly.

"See here," said Sam impatiently. "This is getting us exactly nowhere. I don't know that I'm authorized to butt in on the criminal investigation of this jamboree, but I'm down here to take over for the company and as far as possible get to the bottom of this thing. I suggest that you get down to cases, Miss Sturgis, and if you can stand it, tell us what did happen."

"I'LL BE glad to tell," said Miss Sturgis simply, as if she felt a necessity to throw the burden of it all on other shoulders. "The trouble is where to begin. It starts clear back to the time when we came in here. Cooper—or Cowper, is it?—was already settled here with his son, running goats. I suppose you know what kind of insect *he* was?"

"We've heard something. I wouldn't from that refer to him as an insect, though he may have been bugs. Rather a wolf, I should say."

"Oh, but he was an insect. A particularly foul sort of vermin; but just that and no more. He was venomous, drunken, worthless—but harmless when all is said and done. Weak, mean, cowardly. He was vindictive as a snake, but he hadn't the courage of a jackrabbit. Otherwise, do you suppose he would have taken such spiteful methods to injure his people as marrying a squaw and settling down to being a goatherder? Those are the typically spiteful and cowardly means such an insect would take to get even. I don't say he wouldn't have been dangerous if he'd had the nerve. He might even have shot some one in the back if he had been very drunk and was sufficiently sure he would not be suspected or caught, but never otherwise. And yet there must have been remnants of some better nature in him."

"What makes you think so?" quickly asked Sam.

"The way he acted. When we first came he tried bluff and threats, at which father laughed. Then he tried little petty persecutions and father threatened to thrash him, though he was twice as strong as father. After that he contented himself with scowls and, when drunk in town, with scandal and lies which father—and every one else—ignored. Father paid no attention to him and gradually he retired to himself and minded his own business—or at least didn't interfere with ours.

"We saw more of young Jerry than we did of him, though little enough of the latter—poor thing! Gradually, and of late months, there was a slight change. Cowper seemed to hang about, seeking some recognition, dumbly and sullenly. Finally he took to speaking gruffly to father when they met, though he always ignored me as though I didn't exist. Father reciprocated by doing him some little unobtrusive kindnesses for which Cowper seemed grateful in his way. Though I never encountered him, father told me more than once that Cowper seemed to have something on his mind, to be uneasy and almost remorseful. That was when he was sober. When he was drunk down at Barton he continued to boast and gloat at the shame he was bringing on his family—which he hinted was a distinguished one—in forcing on it a halfbreed for an heir.

"Young Jerry slunk about, the object of the gloating, terrified and abject. I don't know that he actually abused the boy, though I suspect he did. It's hard to read an Indian's feelings. Young Jerry seemed stolid and stupid, but there was a gleam in his eyes sometimes that we didn't like. Father sometimes said that it wasn't exactly safe in Cowper to push the boy too hard. There was no telling what an Indian, much less a breed, would do if pushed.

"Anyhow, nothing definite happened or developed until some three or four months ago when old Juan Peralta had his niece to visit him. There's no harm in Juan, though he would do almost anything not actually vicious for a moderate price. He's pretty high per cent. white for a Mexican of these parts, old Juan, but even so it was queer to see this niece.

"She was white enough, as white as I am, though she has darker hair and her eyes are gray. Rather pretty, too, with beautiful teeth, and taller than most Mexican women. I saw her a couple of times when I rode over to get some mutton from Juan. But I didn't like the way she looked at me, and never tried to get acquainted. And I saw her a few times riding around with Jerry at a distance. Those two got thick almost at once. Queer, too, for I set her down as rather proud and arrogant, haughty; not one to take up with halfbreeds even though she was a Mexican. I don't know, though. Her eyes were—well, sort of mean—hard."

Mr. Wilde smiled tolerantly. This, he thought, was the inevitable feminine touch of harshness toward another woman. He was rather intrigued by this entrance into the drama of the beautiful Mexican. But Miss Sturgis saw and read the smile.

"You needn't think I'm disparaging her," she said curtly. "I'm much as other girls, but in this case I'm not looking for defects even to the extent of inventing them. She has a hard eye if ever there was one. But she seems to like Jerry, to be actually in love with him. As for him, he dotes on her. But I think he's afraid of her, just the same. That doesn't mean much, though. Jerry's a timid, soft sort of animal, after all. Cowed, I'd say. Anyway, those two seem to have fallen in love and arranged to get married. I don't know whether old Jerry cared or whether he knew about it. I never saw Señorita Conchita Dominguez, which is the name she goes by, around Jerry's wickiup. I don't blame her, either, for it's a filthy hole . . . Well, that was the situation when the letter came."

"My letter—I should say, my firm's letter?" asked Mr. Wilde.

"I suppose so. It was the letter father said notified Cowper he was heir to the title, just like the movies have it. I took it over to him. I met Whisky Dave, who is a cowhand for the Box 77; he picked it up from Cuesta on his way up here. He handed it over to me in passing and I rode over with it. First time I had ever gone there alone, but father was sick and old Jerry had been almost decent for some time then. That was the only time I got a glimpse of old Jerry at his tricks and then it was by accident.

"I rode up to the hovel when there weren't any dogs around—I suppose because young Jerry had left them with the goats. The pine needles are thick and I didn't make enough noise for them to hear me. Maybe they were drunk. Anyhow, while I was tying my horse to a stump near the door I had a chance to hear them. Old Jerry was holding forth, fairly chortling with unholy glee, gloating over something. He was drunk, all right, though I never heard of young Jerry drinking much. They were leaning over a table, and Young Jerry's narrow shoulders, his hunched back, were turned so he didn't see me, and old Jerry was too far gone to do so.

"Old Jerry was bullying the young one. He was howling at him—ironically, I thought—how he was heir to belted earls and had to be a credit to them, what an honor it was and what it meant. And he dwelt a great deal on the huge estates and the vast wealth that went with the title, laying it on very thick and crude, now describing the gold tiaras and such and the gaudy robes and then descending to more primitive comparisons, in terms of herds and possessions, goats and sheep and cattle, and such things as might, I suppose, appeal to his son's rather limited mind. It was pretty plain that he was seeking to arouse the boy's greed in order that he should not falter in claiming his rights. Jerry sat there silent. I don't know how he took it. Probably he wouldn't have shown his feelings had he been facing me. He's half Indian.

"I expected the old scoundrel to go further and describe the gorgeous and beautiful women and arouse that obvious side of greed in the boy; but he didn't. I didn't hear a word of women. I suppose Indians take women rather as a matter of course. I was about to step forward with my letter when young Jerry joined in. It always is queer to hear him speak. His voice is so soft and he speaks with a queer, almost cultured English accent—nothing guttural and grunty as you'd suspect. He said:

" 'All very well if they don't find out. But suppose they do?'

" 'You must damn' well see that they don't!" said old Jerry with a chuckle. 'For what else have I trained you?'

" 'I daresay you've trained me, all right,' said Young Jerry a little bitterly. 'And I'll carry on—now. But there's a jolly fine risk just the same. What one finds out, another may.'

" 'What the bally hell do you mean?' roared old Jerry. 'What *one* finds out! *Who's* found out anything?'

" 'She has!' said Young Jerry.

"And the old man struck me then as being not only dumbfounded and frightened but almost paralyzed. He sat there goggling at young Jerry and young Jerry laughed. Jerry's laugh is attractive if anything about him is, but it wasn't attractive then.

" 'Don't *you* worry,' he said bitterly. 'She's as safe—safer than I am. By myself I think I'd never have the nerve to carry it through but *she* has.'

"Well, old Jerry just sat there goggling at him, a most pitiful sight to behold. He was scared, all right, and I almost pitied him, though I didn't understand. I thought they were talking about young Jerry's Indian mother and I suppose they were. Anyhow, it was none of my business. I walked in on them and held out the letter. They just sat and stared at me as though I didn't exist.

" 'Here's news from the old baronial manor, Mr. Cooper,' I said, and handed it to him.

"He sat and stared at it and then, for some reason, he began to cry, the tears filling his red eyes and rolling down his dirty cheeks on to his dirty beard. I had to look away and met young Jerry's eyes. He has fine eyes, by the way, soft and brown; not mean or sneaky at all, but a bit sad. They were sad then, all right, and—sardonic at the same time. They gave me a turn, and I swear I felt almost —almost tender toward that grotesque creature with his yellow, round, weak face and great eyes set on that awkward, lumpy body of his. He's knock-kneed, narrow chested, kind of stoutish in the wrong spots, you know; but his face is appealing. He just shook his head and stared somberly at his father, and I turned away and got out of there. But

I heard the old man snort and gulp and I went.

" 'God!' he said, sobbing. 'I'm in an unholy mess now!'

"And I heard young Jerry say—

" 'A mess of your own mixing, pater—but now *she* holds the spoon.' "

CHAPTER VII

POISONED!

MISS STURGIS had the fine dramatic qualities of fluency and simplicity. They all sat spellbound until she paused as if to rest. The picture of the ill assorted, degraded couple she set before them was vivid. And there was in them all, the sense that behind the tale there was something hidden and secret, something lurking and sinister. Mr. Wilde cleared his throat.

"Evidently," he said, "those words, if correctly quoted, imply something out of order. Deductions seem to me to be inevitable and to lead to something we have suspected. There must be something irregular about this young savage's birth; something which the ineffable scoundrel Cowper is deliberately concealing. And I gather that our hope of finding out what it is lies in approaching this —er—squaw he married. Evidently she knows, and I take it she bears them no good will."

Sam smiled a little sardonically. Dr. Cowper smiled a little doubtfully but still with hope.

"It looks as though that might be it," he admitted and his glance at Miss Sturgis was tinged with a wistful, half timid expectation. "We must certainly look into it."

Sam started to say something and then thought better of it. He took to whistling softly instead, the tune that of the ribald ballad, "The Old Gray Mare."

"Let's get on with it," he suggested when he had run through the measure. He continued to eat, which was more than the others did. Miss Sturgis seemed to welcome his suggestion.

"The rest is horrible enough, but there is even less to it," she said. "For some time things went on as usual, except that old Jerry Cooper took to hanging around father more than ever, as though he wanted to confide in him. Father declared that old Jerry was frightened at something, but he just seemed maudlin to me; maudlin and drunkenly mysterious. He hinted at things, nothing definite or tangible, but he evidently had something to tell and seemed afraid to tell it. He did confide to father that the letter actually brought word that he was heir to a title and intimated that his urge to confidences was due to its arrival.

" 'I think,' said father to me once, 'that the buried spirit of *noblesse oblige* has arisen in Stinking Jerry beneath all his meanness. Something's up, and, if I am not mistaken, it is remorse at the dirty trick he has played on his family. At a distance it looked fine, but now that it ranges close to him its odor offends his nostrils and he finds that he has not succeeded in entirely destroying his sense of smell with bad whisky and foul surroundings. But how he is to set it straight is more than I can guess or he either, I think.'

"There it rested until, as I say, Jerry the younger finally came to his romance with Señorita Conchita. He was going to marry her and, in order to prepare for the nuptials, he went over to San Angelo to purge himself, I take it. I don't know what ceremony was necessary. It was something primitive, I suppose, something more than mere confession and absolution, for he was gone longer than would account for that—several days, in fact.

"You know, the Indian converts retain, with the tolerance of the church, some of their pagan rites, modified to be inoffensive to Christianity, but, perhaps, carrying out there ancient ideas of purification. Anyhow, the señorita didn't indulge in it, for she stayed here with old Juan and kept much to herself as usual. She, as a white woman, could get along with confession and absolution, I suppose, while he, as an Indian, felt constrained to something more elaborate. We know he was at the mission when the crime was committed."

"Perhaps," said Sam mildly, "the length of his stay was not due to some special, half pagan rite he was undergoing. I hardly think it likely—in him. Something else, perhaps. Did the sheriff ask what kept him?"

"I think not," said Miss Sturgis. "But it must have been something."

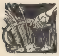
"Sure it was. Something like, shall we say, waiting for a dispensation to marry—a non-Catholic?"

"But she's Mexican already," said Miss Sturgis.

"But maybe she isn't a Catholic. They are sometimes freethinkers, I believe."

"I never thought of that. Anyhow, he was there when father got his call from old Jerry and went there to hear his confession. That came after young Jerry had gone. Jerry had been wilder than usual and met father that day and insisted and begged that he come home with him. Father went out of pity, and an hour later, as near as we could judge, I came upon him halfway between the two places. I had ridden out to meet him, wondering why he was late and afraid that he was ill. He had been failing gradually for some time and I was watching him pretty closely to see that he did not strain himself. He was trying to crawl—between convulsions. It was dreadful—"

She faltered and Sam silently put his hand on hers. She clung to him convulsively for a moment and then, with a long breath, took up her tale.



"I DID what I could, but there were only a few eggs and I am not at all sure that they were the right antidote. I wouldn't have guessed the trouble, but he kept moaning when he could speak—

" 'Something in—the drink!'

"He didn't drink much, but an occasional dram of whisky did him good and he must have had one with old Jerry. But mostly he just writhed and moaned, and I was working frantically and paid little attention. It was no good. He died . . . And I was standing there with him, in front of the house where I had dragged him, when who should come galloping up, on father's horse, frantic apparently with whisky and fright, but old Jerry himself. He was yelling even before he got to me, something incoherent and wild. But I made out something; it sounded like:

" 'Did they get him? Me next! My God, you've got to know!' And then he tumbled off the horse not fifty yards away and I heard the crack of a pistol shot somewhere—I don't know where.

"I ran forward—again I don't know why. I just had to get to him and find out. I was half crazed, I think. And he had somehow rolled to the foot of a big bull pine which sheltered him and was still alive when I got there, though he was far gone with a bullet clean through his lungs not half an inch from his heart. He tried to raise himself and say something to me and I took his head in my arms and bent over him there under the tree. But all I could make out, in a gasping whisper, was:

" 'He'll get you—next.'

"Then he died, too, though I crouched there for some time, holding his head and frozen in the same attitute of straining to listen. And that's all. What he told or was about to tell my father I don't know. What he tried to tell me I don't know. But I think he was killed because he told and tried to tell. And—probably I'll be killed because some one thinks he may have told me before he died."

"What makes you think it?" asked Sam casually.

"Some one took a shot at me day before yesterday," said Miss Sturgis, "and missed me by not more than a quarter of an inch. See!"

She lifted her hair a trifle and showed where the bullet had clipped a lock. Sam whistled.

"You ought to advertise," he said, "that you don't know a damn' thing. It'd be safer."

"I don't want to be safer," said Miss Sturgis. "I want him to think I do know so that I can get a shot at him, perhaps, when he's over eager."

"Why not 'she'?" asked Sam.

"Because old Jerry said 'he'. I'm sure of that."

"Bless my soul," said the bewildered Mr. Wilde. "It is most extraordinary. And not a clue."

"But what about young Gerald Cowper?" said Dr. Cowper constrainedly. "What of him all this time?"

"Nothing," said Miss Sturgis. "He was at the mission. There is no doubt of that. The very day following the murders the señorita rode over there and they were married. He seems to have taken the news with resignation, or with Indian stoicism. They tell me he seemed sad but resigned. Anyhow, it made no difference in the marriage. They were married and came home again. And since then he watches me."

"And yesterday shot at you?" This from Cowper, in uneasy accents.

"Nonsense," said Miss Sturgis. "He gives me the creeps. But he didn't shoot at me. If he had, he never would have come that close. I've seen Jerry shoot. He couldn't hit the side of a barn if he was locked inside it. His shooting is a comedy. The man who shot old Jerry, running, and clipped my hair, is a marksman."

"No empty shells?" asked Sam.

"None that we could find. An ordinary .45 did for old Jerry. Might have been from anybody's gun, and old Mackay was about to give it up, until—"

"Until what?"

Miss Sturgis blushed.

"Oh, the old fool got sentimental. Wanted to hold my hand. He went off and searched old Juan's hut. Said he found some one had been into the strychnine with a spoon—lately! There was the mark in the box where they had scooped out a dose. But what does that prove?"

"Can old Juan shoot straight?" asked Sam.

"Nothing to brag of. I never saw a Mexican who could."

"I have," said Sam. "But not in these parts. It looks rather thick, I must confess. I can't say I blame the sheriff, either."

"For which?" asked Miss Sturgis.

"For either move," said Sam, "least of all the first you mentioned."

"Bless my soul," said Mr. Wilde. "It seems most mysterious and I can't but think that young savage must be at the bottom of it."

"You've had a terrible ordeal, Miss Sturgis," said Dr. Cowper. "As a physician I am going to prescribe a mild sleeping draught and then to bed while we keep watch and ward over you. And may I assure you that you are in safe hands now?"

"Thank you," said Miss Sturgis weakly.

"In safe hands," mused Sam. "*Quien sabe?*"

CHAPTER VIII

THE SHERIFF GOES RIDING

NEXT day dawned on a much refreshed and reassured Miss Sturgis and on guests of hers who, if still puzzled, had at least a feeling that the morning had brought some clarity to the atmosphere. At breakfast Mr. Wilde, with a lawyer's logic, set forth his views, with which Dr. Cowper agreed.

"In the light of reflection," he said, "there seems to be little doubt of what has occurred here. That the culprit has been most cunning in arranging an alibi is self-evident and it may be difficult to controvert it. I take it that his co-religionists, the priest or priests of this mission, will be likely to support his alibi?"

"Who? Padre Felix?" asked Miss Sturgis, whose first name was Marion. "Get that out of your head. Padre Felix is a saint and a shrewd one. And he says young Jerry was at the mission."

Mr. Wilde looked blank.

"Then he must have been deceived himself," he hazarded. "Everything points to one conclusion. It is evident that this foisting of his halfbreed son on us as his rightful heir was a fraud of

Gerald Cowper's. Your father gives us our lead there. You quote him as saying that remorse, a belated feeling of *noblesse*, had evidently stricken Gerald, and I gather unmistakably that this remorse had to do with foisting upon us a fraudulent heir. He was about to confess this to your father—perhaps did confess it—when your father was poisoned. Then old Cowper tried to reach you in turn and warn you, but was shot down before he could do so. Obviously we must search here for one who had the motive. And that one is young Jerry Cowper who knew that the fraud was about to be exposed."

"All very well," said Marion doubtfully. "It sounds logical, but Jerry was many miles away at the time. That is absolutely certain. Besides, Jerry would never kill his father—"

"A halfbreed! Who knows what such a creature would do?" interrupted Mr. Wilde.

He turned to Sam for confirmation of this widely held opinion. Sam shook his head. He was looking thoughtfully and intently at Marion Sturgis. She looked up and blushed slightly.

"What's that?" he said apologetically, as he realized that he was being appealed to. "Oh, halfbreeds? Well, I don't know. I've lived pretty widely and seen a many *cholos* and mongrels in my time. It strikes me that when they are deficient or vicious it is as much due to the fact that they are looked down on as inferiors as to anything else. I've seen some breeds I'd trust as far as any one."

"But, surely, in this case the facts are obvious," interjected Dr. Cowper almost pleadingly.

He was thinking that Marion Sturgis was a splendid and lovely woman who would splendidly grace a title and baronial halls; that if he were Viscount Maudley, rich and distinguished, he might well hope to outrival this good looking but doubtless commonplace cowpuncher. He greatly desired at this moment to be the viscount and his desires perhaps bolstered his opinions.

"They don't look that way to me," said Sam. "I hate to disappoint you but, Judge, I know sheriffs in this section and I am not sure that this one is a fool. They generally aren't. The young heir has an alibi which seems good. The sheriff has a suspect and he probably has a reason for that. I'd like to see this sheriff. And I'd like to know where that assassin was holed up when he bumped off old Jerry. You say it was a six-shooter he fired, Miss Sturgis?"

"It sounded like one, but the sound was not so loud. It was at some distance."

"And no cartridge found?"

"None that time. When I was shot at it was from a rifle. At least I think so. We found a shell, a .30-30, about two hundred yards up in some brush on the hill."

"Who found it?"

"Sheriff Mackay and I. He and I searched thoroughly."

"And he'd have found anything like a shell if a rifle had been used on old Jerry. Then I'd say it was a six-shooter and fired at some distance. It was a center shot, you say, which argues that the man using the gun was a sidewinder. He could sure hold on a mark."

"I don't see how you arrive at those conclusions," said Mr. Wilde who, as a lawyer, wanted exact evidence except when stating his own case.

"Easily enough. I'll go still further: Provided it was the same fellow in each case who shot Jerry and shot at Miss Sturgis, he was a damned good shot with a six-shooter and not so hot with a rifle. I'll tell you why. Jerry was fifty yards away from Miss Sturgis when he was shot and the shot did not sound very loud. That means that it was fired from more than a hundred yards away from her and, necessarily, more than fifty yards from old Jerry. Yet it was a center shot—dead on the mark.

"Now, fifty yards is a darned long range for a six-shooter on a moving target. You say it might have been a rifle. Not likely if Miss Sturgis thought it a six-shooter. They don't sound alike, even a small caliber six-shooter making a louder and duller noise than a high power rifle. One bangs, the other cracks like a whip. Anyhow, the sheriff has the bullet, no doubt, and can tell us which it was.

"Now, assuming that the same person made both attempts, the second, on Miss Sturgis, was evidently made with a rifle at two hundred yards. That distance is a long range, no matter what some of these parlor marksmen may tell you, but it isn't a prohibitive range, especially on a mark as large as a woman. A real good shot wouldn't have missed her entirely."

"But surely a man who is a good shot with a revolver would be an even better one with a rifle," protested Dr. Cowper.

"Not at all. Many a crack with a six-gun can't perform above the average with a rifle and many a crack rifle shot couldn't hit a balloon with a six-shooter. All o' this looks to me like there's a factor in it which no one has yet guessed. I would like to see this sheriff and have a word with him. How far is it to Barton?"

"Twenty-five miles or more," said Marion gloomily. "The sheriff was here when I was shot at. He hadn't left yet. He hung around like he'd never go. And he'll be back again. He's had time to go and come and I expect him any minute."

"Just when did he come and when leave?" asked Sam.

"Well, it's this way. Father was poisoned and old Jerry shot just seven days ago today. When the second event occurred, I got scared and rode as hard as I could to the Lazy M ranch, nine miles over on Poverty Branch. A cowboy there took a message for me to the sheriff and my telegram to the company, and some others came back with me. We found nothing and the next day the sheriff came up. He sent the bodies to Barton and hung around until two days ago when he arrested Peralta and went down.

"Today is Thursday. It was last Thursday that father was murdered with old Jerry. The sheriff got here on Friday week, which was quick time. On Monday young Jerry and his new wife, who had been married on Saturday evening, came home. On Tuesday, in the morning I was shot at. On Wednesday Mackay arrested Peralta and went away. On Thursday, that is, yesterday, you came—thank God!"

Sam remained frowningly thoughtful.

"I'd like to see that sheriff," he remarked again, and that was all he said.

SAM HAD his wish even as Marion had predicted. About two o'clock in the afternoon, after an obviously hard ride, a tall, lean man with a weather beaten face and keen eyes, clad in corduroy trousers tucked into high boots, and liberally spurred, with a leather vest supporting over his left breast a silver badge of office, rode into the meadow and dismounted before the corral.

He came alone. He was armed with rifle slung on his saddle and six-shooter strapped down to his thigh. Marion met him while he was turning his horse out and providing hay and water for the somewhat lathered animal. After an exchange of greetings, somewhat emotional on the part of the sheriff, she led him to the veranda where the others had gathered. She presented them and the sheriff shook hands with them, looking curiously at the two Englishmen and with a veiled, yet keen, scrutiny upon Sam.

He was a man, they judged, of about forty, rather good looking but, the Englishmen soon agreed, about as taciturn as any one they had ever seen. He seemed to have nothing at all to say and only his occasional glances at Marion were at all eloquent. He seemed to have dismissed the Englishmen from any serious consideration as soon as he had heard of their connection with the affair, but toward Sam he maintained a rather suspicious reserve which had something in it of resentment. He ate the lunch Marion prepared for him in silence, but when he was refreshed he took occasion to follow her out to the kitchen lean-to at the rear of the house and there seek confidential word with her.

"Excuse me, Miss Marion," he said to her as she turned to hear him. "I ain't aimin' to crowd in on you none where I ain't wanted. But there was somethin' I allowed to say to you and I reckon maybe I won't have many chances to say it unless I say it now. First off, though, I was wantin' to ask you if this here Hasbrook is a friend of yours. Meanin', have you knowed him long?"

"I never met him in my life before yesterday," said Marion. "Why do you ask? Isn't he all right? He comes from the company."

"Why, yes, miss, I reckon he's all right. I don't know him none, but I've heard plenty, and from what I hear he's a man to tie to. I was just askin' because it strikes me that you're sort of alone in the world now and maybe short of friends you can turn to. I reckon you'll be goin' away soon, too."

"Not until I know who killed my father," she asserted spiritedly.

"You don't need to worry none there, miss. I'll know soon enough. I think I know already, but there's one thing that has me stumped. I'm goin' to find that out today, though. What was really on my mind, though, was you. Now I ain't much, and I'm right old accordin' to your lights, maybe. But I've knowed you off and on fer nigh a year now. And every hour I've knowed you I've thought a heap more of you; and I started with a mighty high opinion. I'm here to help you and mighty proud to do it, but it ain't only that. If you go away, I want to know if you're goin' to folks you like and can trust. And if you ain't—if there ain't any one nowheres else you could like and trust more than you can me, if you wouldn't maybe . . . If so be that you could—if—well, if you couldn't come back, or stay here—er—hell, I reckon you can guess what I mean!"

Marion's eyes softened as she held out her hand.

"Mr. Mackay," she said, "I do understand. And I think I *would* come back—to you—but, there is some one else, I'm afraid. He doesn't know it—yet. But perhaps he may some day."

The sheriff blinked, cleared his throat and mopped his face with a bandanna. He gave no other evidence of emotion, but the little weather lines in his face seemed to deepen and to add a few years to his age.

"Er!" he growled. "Well, I'm glad you told me, Miss Marion, and proud you could tell me. And if this here dumb son of a gun don't act like he ought to, I hope you'll tell me and I'll sure show him where he heads in. And now I'm a-goin' to ramble on, but I ain't lyin' down on the job. Before sundown I'll know who killed your father or I'll be playin' a harp."

"You think there's danger?" she asked quickly.

He was already on his way back to the living room where he had dined and where the others still awaited him. He turned slightly toward her.

"I come alone," he said, "because what I think don't square up nor make sense, and if I'm wrong I don't want no one else to git the blame for it. But if I'm right, it's my opinion that I'd be better off with a couple o' deputies behind me."

"But who do you suspect?" she insisted. "Surely not Peralta?"

"That oiler?" the sheriff remarked with scorn. "I run him in to throw a scare into him. No, he didn't do it and maybe he don't even know who did do it. But the strychnine come from his caddy and he's admitted enough fer me to go askin' others a few questions."

The others hung expectantly upon his words, hoping for other revelations. But none came at the moment. The sheriff made a formal bow to his hostess, which she returned with kindness and regret, and turned to seek his horse and go on his way. But as he passed Sam he gave him an imperceptible nod. Sam arose and, with the remark that he would help saddle the horse, followed the officer out to the corral.

"Young feller," said the sheriff gruffly and without preliminary, "are you a square guy?"

"I try to be," said Sam.

"This here girl here," went on the

sheriff, "is a sure enough high grade lady. I'd like to know she's goin' to be looked after right. I don't mind sayin' that I'd like to do the lookin' after if she'd let me, but she don't cotton to me none. Besides, it may be that I won't be here long to look after no one. Sheriffin' around hereabouts is a hectic trade at times, and I ain't a good risk fer insurance. How about it?"

"I'm here to look after her," said Sam. "I'd do it anyway, but since I've seen her I'm urged to do the best job there is in me, Sheriff."

"That's all right," said the sheriff. "But I'd like to know if that means for your sake or for hers."

"For hers," said Sam simply.

The sheriff looked keenly at him.

"D'you know," he said, "that she just told me there was another feller had the call with her?"

Sam's face remained unmoved except for a slight tightening of the jaw. He spoke as quietly as before.

"That's all right, Sheriff," he said. "It's natural. But it don't make any difference, does it—not with you and me?"

"No," said Mackay, "not with you and me. I'm glad to know that. I've heard tell of you. I'm a pretty fast gun and I've had my share of shakin' it in my time. But if what they say is true, you're a better man than me. Better, maybe, even than this here— Did you ever hear of him—this here Pueblo Pete Slocum?"

"Of course I've heard of him. But I'm not claiming that much for myself. I guess I'm pretty fair, but he's the best since Billy the Kid—and maybe better than that."

"Those pilgrims in there, are they any good?"

"Game, and with a fair natural knack, but pretty green," said Sam.

He was keenly aware that he was on the verge of some revelation or other but he gave no sign of knowing it.

"Well—they won't help you much and maybe you'll need help bad. Now, I'm goin' up to Cooper's shack—alone—and I may not come back. I got a hunch—and some information—but one little thing is holdin' me. That's the fact that he married her."

"Yes?" said Sam, puzzled.

"It sure beats me. If I'd had more time to make Peralta talk—but all I could get outa him was that he was scared to say a word. I don't know! And if I'm wrong I'd look a damn' fool luggin' in any help with me. But if I'm right—then I'm facin' somethin' bad and Miss Marion is facin' worse. Now, look here. I'm tellin' you I'm goin' up there to arrest the murderer—"

"Cowper?" Sam put in.

"No. Not Cowper. His wife. And that's what gets me. His wife! I seen them two together when they come back from gettin' married and I'll swear that Jerry was in love with the señorita! That's what gravels me—bad. You ever see her?"

"I've never seen either of them—yet!"

"Well, look close when you do. And look at *this* first."

The sheriff pulled a piece of paper from his pocket and handed it to Sam. Sam studied it carefully and with a frown before putting it in his own pocket.

"You get me?" asked the sheriff.

"I get you," replied Sam. "It's damn' queer though."

"I'm goin' to find out," said Mackay. "If I don't come back—you might come lookin' for me. So long."

And he mounted and rode away.

CHAPTER IX

A WARNING

THE SHERIFF had been gone perhaps two or three hours. Time had passed slowly. There was nothing much to do and to idleness was added a feeling of oppressive suspense. There was no sign of life beyond the vicinity of the house. Yet all of them felt depressed and nervous with the possible exception of Sam. He attended to the stock and after that sat with his heels hooked into a rail of the corral, whittling idly at a stick and gazing out over the valley at nothing.

Mr. Wilde and Dr. Cowper talked together on the gallery of the house. The lawyer expressed the opinion that they had better leave as soon as possible, since there seemed no prospect of successfully refuting the claims of the heir to the title and wealth of the viscountship.

Dr. Cowper especially was depressed. He had made a long and expensive journey in the hope and expectation of proving the claimant a fraud. Since arriving at this remote spot and meeting Miss Marion Sturgis, the incentive to prove the claim fraudulent was greatly increased but, unfortunately, all investigation had shown that the claimant was genuine. Dr. Cowper was, in his own right, only a young and ambitious physician without a practise. He had, in addition, an idea that all American women were used to luxury and demanded it. And it seemed to him that a girl like Marion Sturgis, unaffected and forthright as she was, deserved and must require all that wealth could bestow.

Even here, in this remote and rude region, he beheld in the bungalow evidence of what seemed to his British eyes luxury unattainable by a struggling professional man in his own country. Her clothes were rough outdoor affairs, but in style and material they looked rather expensive to him. The furnishings of the house were rather new and good; the bathroom was dainty and luxurious. He had no idea that all this was an ordinary donation of the company, or that Marion's own education had largely been paid for by that impersonal but kindly corporation. He knew that she was considered poor, but if this sort of thing was poverty in America, how would she regard the poverty of his own land? Not very cheerfully, he believed.

If he had only found himself Viscount Maudley all would have been so different. But not he, but Jerry Cowper, half-breed goatherder, was Viscount Maudley. There was not a doubt of that, apparently, or if there was doubt, all chance of resolving that doubt in his own favor had irrevocably passed when Jerry's father had died from an assassin's bullet.

The Englishmen had come here to see this Jerry Cowper, but now it seemed to both that any association whatever with the man would be decidedly unpleasant. Mr. Wilde, to be sure, felt a sort of duty, now that he was here, to meet the man and make some sort of preliminary and tentative acknowledgment of his claim. But, after all, he told himself, was it necessary? He had really come on a hostile errand and to turn that errand into an overture to the new heir went against the grain. If he had not come, his firm would merely have notified the man and have awaited his arrival with the proper proofs of identity and legitimacy. He knew that his assistance would not be needed in preparing those proofs.

Indeed, old Jerry and his son had already attended to that. He knew from his own searches that they had every document and affidavit necessary to establish the claim. On the whole, he felt that duty did not, in this case, run counter to inclination. The best thing he could do would be to return home and there await the arrival of the young savage. He said as much to Dr. Cowper and that young man gloomily agreed.

"For my part," he said a little bitterly, "I don't want to set eyes at all on the brute. What a disaster for the Cowpers! We'll pack up and get out right away."

So he went in to inform Marion of their decision. She heard it with apparent regret, but when he declared that they would start at once she laughed a little.

"How?" she asked mildly, and he looked blank.

Then it dawned on him and he blushed.

"By Jove!" he remarked. "I had forgotten. But I daresay one of your neighbors could furnish us a conveyance of a sort to take us to the railroad. Perhaps a messenger—"

"The nearest neighbor," she explained, "other than your cousin Jerry, lives over ten miles away and I haven't at present any one I could send there. In a day or two, however, either Mr. Hasbrook or myself can ride over for you. But until then I'm afraid you'll have to wait."

And then she added after a slight hesitation:

"Besides, I would be glad to have you stay—for my own sake. I—I am a little uneasy after all that has happened. There may be no danger, but I can't help feeling a bit nervous."

Dr. Cowper was cheered at the prospect of being of service to her.

"Why, of course," he said heartily. "We shall stay as long as we can help you, Miss Sturgis. But I say, if there is danger wouldn't it be the sensible thing for you to leave too?"

"It might be the sensible thing," said Marion grimly, "but it's not the thing I shall do. I'm here to stay until I find out who killed my father. That's all there is to that."

"Of course," said Dr. Cowper, though he thought that it was rather the duty of the police to make such discoveries. "And you may rely on our aid to the fullest extent."

SAM HASBROOK still sat idly on the top rail of the corral. He was sitting there when Marion came out to him and noted his preoccupation. She came and stood beside him and, after a moment, spoke.

"You seem to be lost," she remarked. "Are you thinking or merely ruminating?"

"I was sort of thinking," said Sam apologetically. "I was thinking that it's a right tangled puzzle we've got here and that it's going to take some unraveling. I was sent up to look after you—and the place. And I'm thinking maybe the best way to do it would be to take you out of here and put you where you'll be safe. What do you say?"

"Who's going to hurt me here," she answered, "with all you dauntless men around to protect me?"

"Speaking personally," said Sam, as he carefully shaved a long and slender peeling from his stick, "I don't feel so all-fired dauntless myself. Dauntless folks, in my experience, are generally folks too ignorant to have any sense, or those that don't realize what they are up against. You take that sheriff, now. When he rode away from here he wasn't dauntless. He was right uneasy—and he strikes me as being a brave man too. You see, he had a pretty lively notion of what he was up against. And he told me what his notion was. It don't make sense, but it does make me uneasy—like it did him. Why don't you pull out for the settlements with those two pilgrims? It'd save a lot of grief."

"Well, I won't go and that's flat," said Marion. "I suppose you want me to go to get rid of me—"

"Not on your life," said Sam hastily. "If I had my wish you'd linger around the rest of your life. But you ought to go, just the same."

"If Sheriff Mackay brings in the man who killed my father, I will," said she. "Not otherwise."

Sam nodded. He was looking soberly down the cliff, his eyes on that spot Marion had once before pointed out to him. On it, as before, was a figure, patient, almost motionless. He spoke irrelevantly.

"That gives a fellow a sort of creeps," he remarked. "There's the viscount—been there for two hours. He hasn't moved more than a couple of feet in all that time."

"Poor fellow," said Marion. "I feel sorry for him."

"You might feel sorry for me," said Sam. "I've spent a tiresome time keeping an eye on him. I don't know that I gain anything by it except to know that he's there."

"But why?" asked Marion helplessly. "Can you tell me that?"

"I can't," said Sam. "Beyond guessing that he—or some one else—wants mighty bad to know just what we are doing and when we do it."

"It's very strange," said Marion.

"There's other strange things," said Sam. "It looks a bit queer to me, for instance, that Mackay isn't back. He's been gone three hours and it shouldn't have took him all that time to ride five miles, arrest a woman and bring her back here. He promised to come back, you know."

Marion became grave.

"Do you think anything could have happened to him?" she asked.

"I don't know," said Sam. "But I'm going to find out." After a short silence, he added, "I'm going to suggest that you come along with me and help me. Will you?"

She nodded without answering. Then—

"Why?"

"Oh, I don't know," said Sam. "I've a notion—that I don't want to leave you out of my sight."

SHE DID NOT look at her or he might have seen the sidelong glance she gave him, accompanied by a slight smile. Instead he slid down from his perch and sought his rope with which he set to catching his horse and her own. The saddling of them took but a few minutes, by which time Marion was ready, and they mounted and rode around to the front of the house where they announced their intentions to the two Englishmen.

"But, I say, we'd like to come too," said Dr. Cowper eagerly.

Mr. Wilde added his own assurance, but Sam only smiled.

"Walking's no good in this country," he said. "And there aren't any horses for you. No, Judge, you and Doc stick right here and take care of the place. But let me ask you to please keep under cover, and if any stranger comes snoopin' around, don't let hospitality run away with your judgment. Speaking for myself only, I'd say that no matter who knocks before we get back, you had better go slow in letting him in."

"You think there's danger?" asked Dr. Cowper a bit incredulously. "But why? Why should any one desire to injure us?"

"Well," said Sam slowly, "your interesting cousin has been right persevering in watching this place and it's a cinch he knows you're here and, probably, who you are. You've been here quite long enough, it will seem to him and to any others interested, for you to hear from Miss Marion whatever her father and Jerry's father had to tell her. You say they didn't tell her anything and you are right. But these birds, remember, don't know that. They can't be sure of it. To my notion, assuming that Miss Marion *might* have heard something and that she *might* have passed it on to you and me, there's only one thing for the party who's so interested to do: He'll just aim to bushwhack each and every one of us in turn until he bags the lot. You see the point?"

"But, my God!" said Mr. Wilde aghast. "You mean to say this creature would commit wholesale murder on a mere suspicion? It is incredible!"

"If I have the right party in mind," said Sam, "he'd murder for suspicion or for amusement. And if he's murdering, as I think, for his own safety and fortune, he'll commit butcheries with an amount of cheerfulness that'd surprise you."

But now Marion shook her head indignantly, as the Englishmen stared.

"And I say you're quite wrong," she asserted. "Jerry Cowper, heaven knows, is no favorite with me, but he is quite incapable of any such villainy as that."

"You can't ever tell what an Indian is capable of," said Sam mildly. "Besides which, I wasn't naming young Jerry as the party in mind."

"But there is no other man around who could possibly be involved," she insisted.

"Well, that seems to be right," said Sam. "But just the same, you two would better lay low and play safe while we are gone."

"I can assure you," said Mr. Wilde grimly, "that any one making an attack upon us will meet with a warm reception. Though I assume that you must be ragging us, rather, about the danger. I believe it is an American habit."

"I'm afraid I don't feel so jocose as all that," said Sam dryly. "Keep the doors shut and your guns loose. We'll be back in an hour or so."

He wheeled his horse, nodded to Marion and they set out at a swinging trot down the valley on the trail the sheriff had already taken.

The two Englishmen watched them go. As they passed out of sight Mr. Wilde said—

"My word, do you suppose he was serious?"

Dr. Cowper shrugged his shoulders.

"Can't say I believe a word of it," he remarked jealously. "It's nonsense, of course; Wild West stuff calculated to frighten us. But—serious! I think he's that. He wanted to get Miss Sturgis away from us and alone with himself. That's plain to be seen."

"You don't insinuate—" began Mr. Wilde.

"Not a thing but that he is in love with her—for which one can't blame him, I confess. But as for the mysterious assassin in wholesale lots—that's all tosh."

"I'm inclined to agree with you," said Mr. Wilde. "There seems to be no evidence whatever that any one is concerned except this halfbreed cousin of yours—and, of course, his wife. One has to take her into account. There has been no sign of any one else lurking around who might be involved. The Mexican has been in jail, remember, and I presume has not yet been released. If he is the murderer, we are quite safe from him. Young Jerry, of course, may be any kind of villain you wish. He probably is, in spite of Miss Sturgis' faith in him. But he is ensconced at present up on the cliff in full view, and yet they ride away with apparently no concern for him. It might be, of course, that the warning had reference to him."

"But he couldn't have been the murderer," objected the doctor. "And certainly Mr. Hasbrook displayed no concern about him. It strikes me, though, that it might be well if we took a look to see what that sportsman is doing now."

Mr. Wilde agreed and they went to the other side of the house where they had a view of the cliff. There, dwarfed by distance, the patient watcher still crouched, but this time in another attitude and displaying more activity. He had kindled a fire and, with what looked like a blanket, was busily maneuvering in such a way as to cause the smoky blaze to send up balls and pillars of smoke into the air. They watched this performance with astonishment until an idea occurred to Dr. Cowper.

"By Jove!" he said excitedly. "I get the idea. I've read about those things, of course. It's a smoke message. He's giving information to some confederate. D'you suppose that Hasbrook fellow could possibly have meant what he said?"

"It seems more plausible now," said Mr. Wilde. "But I must confess that the affair grows absolutely mysterious. Should we go after them and warn them, I wonder?"

"He told us to remain under cover," said the doctor dubiously. "Besides, we don't know the route they took."

The upshot of the matter was that they retired to the house and sat uneasily for ten or fifteen minutes. At the end of that time they heard the stamping of a horse, and a high, clear voice called. They arose with one accord and looked out a window to behold a young woman sitting on a horse, her long skirts falling straight along its flanks, her head enwrapped with a *mantilla*.

"By Jove, here's news no doubt," said the doctor as he stepped to the door.

The lawyer crowded behind him and they both stood for a moment framed in the opening.

Shots rang out with the swift rattle of thunder and, with a stupefied expression, Mr. Wilde pitched forward. Beside him, staring in horror and amazement, Dr. Cowper sagged slowly at the knees and rolled over to lie on his face half across his friend's body. The girl on the horse gazed at them expressionlessly and then wheeled and rode away.

CHAPTER X

MURDER

SAM and Marion rode fast and steadily on the trail of the sheriff, which was plainly marked, to Sam's eye at least. The officer had also gone rapidly and without hesitation. They easily followed his tracks for two or three miles until they came to that split in the cañon wall where the trail turned up a forbidding gulch off toward the shack which the Cowpers had inhabited. They could see, browsing in the brush which grew amidst the rocks, the scattered members of a flock of goats, evidently untended and neglected. A scrawny and slinking dog shrank away into concealment as they turned and splashed their way through the stream and entered the mouth of the gulch. The tracks of the sheriff's horse still led them.

But now Sam went warily and, when Marion turned an anxious and inquiring face to him, he shrugged dubiously and pointed to the ground.

"He was going soft and slow here," he explained. "See—where he's drawn up and stood a moment to look the scenery over? And there again he's pulled in. And now he's going no faster than a walk, and I'll gamble that he had his six-gun in his hand."

"But why?" asked Marion. "There's no one here, is there, but that Mexican girl that Jerry married? Jerry is on the cliff and has been for hours."

"Signaling some one," added Sam. "He made a smoke before we were fairly out of sight. I saw it rising back of us."

"But signaling who?" she persisted.

"Oh, telling his wife he wouldn't be home to lunch," said Sam without mirth. "Come to think of it, though, it's past lunch time, isn't it?"

"Don't be such a fool," said Marion angrily. "Why walk in mystery? What do you suspect? Who is doing all this horrible work? Can't you give an answer?"

"I think," said Sam, reining in and reaching for her bridle to stop her, "that part of the answer is right ahead. Hold hard. Maybe it's a dead goat where those vultures are; but I don't think so. Steady now, Marion. This ain't going to be nice."

Marion caught her breath. A wave almost of nausea swept over her as she stared, fascinated, ahead. There, behind a rock shrouded with scrub, lay something indistinct. A neigh sounded from a height above them and she tore her gaze away to sweep the hillside where, high up, with rein dangling, a horse posed riderless, ears pricked as he gazed down at them.

"Another!" gasped Marion. "My God! That's Mackay's horse."

"Down on your feet," ordered Sam with a cold, iron note in his voice. "Swing your horse across you and stand there. No moving from behind him."

She obeyed dumbly, but as he himself swung to the ground and crouched a moment, with drawn six-shooter, before going forward, she uttered a sharp protest.

"Not you—not you, too, Sam!" she cried. "Come back!"

"Not me," said Sam icily. "Not until I see if this joker shakes as fast a gun as they say. Stay where you are!"

She stayed, overawed and silenced by some new quality in the man. He went slowly on, crouching like a tiger, tense and lithe, his eyes sweeping the surroundings restlessly for any movement. The sheriff's horse began scrambling down to join his mates, and for a brief instant Sam watched him. Then, reassured, he went on more swiftly and confidently. If there was another horse in the vicinity, with or without a rider, the sheriff's abandoned mount would not have shown that eagerness to come down to them.

Nothing happened. He came to the rock and stood, eyes alert, sweeping again the scene before he turned to the body at his feet. Vultures had already been at work, but they had done little damage as yet. Their presence, until he had scared them away, also argued what seemed now to be certain: the assassin had left the scene.

The body was that of Mackay. It

lay face down, and in one outstretched hand was clutched the six-shooter. Sam stooped over the gruesome find and gingerly took the gun from the stiffening hand, to swing the cylinder out and eject the shells. Two had been fired. Turning again to the body, he pushed it over. There was a single bullet wound just above the bloodstained nickel shield of office.

"A mark to shoot at," muttered Sam. "And a center shot. But where did Mackay's fire go to?"

Again he noted the sign around the body. There was a deepening indentation of the toes of the sheriff's boots, which he read correctly. The man had dropped forward, almost instantly killed by that one shot, and his toes had pivoted into the ground as his weight came on them. And beside the body, not two feet from the head, was a hole in the ground, evidently blown there by the sheriff's second bullet, discharged as he fell. But where had the first one gone?

Sam pondered the question. He bent again over the marks on the ground, reading them with keen and steady eyes. He saw where the sheriff had dismounted and gone forward on foot for a few paces, stepping warily and as though stalking cover. Here for an instant he had stood, and then, in answer to some alarm, had wheeled suddenly to face his death. He had fired then, no doubt, probably hastily. He would need to be hasty and swift if Sam was correct.

Sam looked again at Marion. She stood patiently but with eyes strained upon him. He waved to her reassuringly. If there had been immediate peril he would have encountered it long before this. He turned again and strode in the direction in which Mackay had been facing when he fell. With eyes alert for every sign, he came at last to a covert, breast high, where it was at once evident some one had crouched in ambush. He found the marks of small boots, toes close together, one slightly behind the other, without marks of heels. Some one had been squatting, cowboy fashion, with one leg bent back under so as to be able to rise the faster. And on the rock behind was a silvery splash of nickel and lead where a bullet had struck and glanced off. Here was where the sheriff's first shot had gone. It had been a clean miss.

The sheriff was a fast and accurate gun, noted as such. It was not like him to miss so completely at such a range. To Sam's mind there was only one explanation. He had met a faster shot and, quick as he might have been, the other had been a fraction of a second faster. That bore out what he had suspected.

SAM WENT farther to search for horse tracks but he could not find any. Nor was there any trace of other footmarks. The assassin had evidently come by way of rock or hardpan and had left no traces. There was, here and there, a trace of broken foliage, but while a legendary Indian might have read a complete story from these twigs, Sam did not feel called upon to try it. They might have been made by browsing goats, and in any case he thought he knew enough for his purposes. He turned and went back to Marion.

"Well?" she demanded tensely.

"It was Mackay," he said. "Just as I thought. Dead—shot!"

Marion stared at him with parted lips.

"What shall we do?" she whispered. "What shall we do?"

Sam motioned her to her saddle and mounted himself.

"We're going to ride like hell for the house," he said grimly. "I never should have left those two pilgrims alone. God grant us that they are still alive."

They galloped down the gulch and wheeled across the stream to storm upward through the valley until the cliffs with their streaming jets of water came into view and below them the cabin nestling peacefully and drowsily in the meadows. There was no sight or sound of life, no threat of any kind to be seen or sensed. Yet Marion's heart pounded with terror as she galloped after Hasbrook, and even Sam's grim face had a tense and horrified expression upon it.

So they wheeled in front of the place and there, on the porch, before the open door, they came upon the guests who had so lately shared their food and shelter, now grotesquely piled in a pitiful heap. There sprawled Mr. Wilde, on his face a look of utter stupefaction. There lay Dr. Cowper, his kindly, boyish face distorted by a stare of amazement and dawning horror.

Marion uttered a moan and slipped from her saddle in a faint. Sam had leaped to the ground and caught her as she dropped. He carried her into the house, put her on a sofa and then, with swift feet and drawn gun, hurried into every room. Then he came back and bolted the door at the rear. He hastened out and dragged the bodies in to lay them side by side on the bed in one of the spare rooms. This done, he closed and locked the front door and returned to Marion.

He chafed her cold hands, applied a cloth saturated with cold water to her face, but for some time she lay unconscious. At last she began to recover, but as she slowly came out of her faint she was seized with a nervous chill and then with hysterical terror as realization came back to her. Sam at last had to hold her in his arms as he might a frightened child, soothing her with comforting words until she recovered something of her usual poise and self-command, though she remained white and shaken.

He had to tell her where the bodies lay lest she should stumble upon them unawares and receive a further shock. She shivered as she glanced fearfully toward the closed door and then resolutely turned away.

"But tell me," she exclaimed, when she had regained full control of herself, "what does it all mean? Why—why, some monster must be abroad determined to murder every one of us!"

"It looks exactly like it," said Sam grimly. "And he's come pretty near succeeding, at that. A couple more of us and he's finished. But, damn it, even now I can't get quite the connection." And he chewed his lip, frowning in concentration.

"But," insisted Marion, "who is it? There are no strangers around, and it simply can't be Jerry. He wouldn't—and he couldn't. When Mr. Mackay was killed, he was on the cliff in plain sight. But—but of course he could have been here when those—poor—"

"He could have been; but he didn't kill 'em. There were only two shots fired and each was dead center. Jerry, according to you, can't shoot for nuts. The fellow who downed those two pilgrims was a wolf with a gun."

"But," cried Marion, "who was it, then?"

Sam remained silent, frowning. Then:

"Did Sheriff Mackay display any particular activity around here before your father was killed? Was he trailing any one that you know of?"

"Why, yes," said Marion wonderingly. "About two or three months ago there was a lot of hunting around the mountains. It seems there was a rumor that some criminal had escaped from prison and was supposed to have come this way. Some one called Pueblo Pete or something like that. But although the sheriff and a lot of men combed every foot of the country for weeks they had to give it up. There was no one hiding here like that."

Again Sam ruminated.

"Had this niece of Peralta's come here at that time?" he asked at length.

Marion tried to remember, wondering in the meanwhile what connection the arrival of the Mexican girl had to do with it.

"I think so," she said. "She came either just before or just after the alarm was out about this desperado."

"And now think," said Sam earnestly. "D'you remember just what Mackay said when he arrested Peralta—on flimsy evidence as you assert?"

"Why, I'm not sure. When he told us he had taken him in I was insistent that he had made a mistake. He said some one had had a spoon in Peralta's strychnine, and that was enough for him. I said it was silly to think that old fellow would poison my father, and then he retorted something to the effect that maybe it was but it wouldn't hurt him to be behind the bars for awhile and might even be good for him. I recall that he looked very grim as he said that."

"Hum," said Sam. "And today he told me that Peralta was frightened—too frightened to talk. Up to a point I can see light, but beyond that, like Mackay, I'm stumped. Now, just think a while, carefully. What about this romance of Jerry and the Señorita Concepción Dominguez. Genuine—or not?"

"Genuine? I don't understand. Do you mean, is Jerry in love with her? If that's what you are driving at, I can tell you he is—almost pitifully so. He is almost abject, doting, you might say. I've seen them together, though not very close to me, and if ever there was a poor creature in love it is Jerry."

"And the señorita?"

"As to that I can't say. She seems to be—well, tolerant, as near as I can make out. But she's white and if, as I suppose is the case, she married him because of his title and presumptive wealth, you wouldn't look for any very strong display of affection from her. As far as my limited observation goes, she treats him kindly enough, if that is what you mean."

"And he dotes on her?"

"He fairly idolizes her," said Marion firmly.

Sam rose and began to pace the floor. Then he stopped, took down a pair of field glasses from the wall and, going to the window, cautiously raised it and began to scan the valley in front of the house. From this point it was all meadow with only a thin fringe of willows and small cottonwoods a hundred yards away at the creek bank. For almost half a mile, with the exception of that scanty hedge, the ground was free of any cover behind which an enemy might hide. At the rear the cliffs rose at some distance. On either flank the rather flat bench on which the house was built stretched away as bare of covering growth as the meadow out in front. A line of two-inch pipe ran along the base of the cliff from one of the springs above it, supplying the establishment with water.

Sam judged that it was safe to go outside so long as he kept the house between himself and any possible enemy on the cliff. He cautiously opened the door and stepped out to the trampled area before the veranda. He bent down and scanned this carefully and then came slowly in again, shaking his head.

"Well?" asked Marion anxiously.

"Nothing much," he said. "A fellow on a horse came up and, evidently, in spite of my warning, those two poor pilgrims went out to him. He must have shot 'em down and wheeled and rode away. Never even dismounted, which shows he was damned sure of his aim. All you got to go on are horse tracks. If I was a native around here I might be able to spot whose horse it was, but it wasn't shod and of course I've no idea who rode it—or if I've got an idea, I've got no proof."

"What idea?" demanded Marion sharply.

"The same as the sheriff's," said Sam, moodily. "And it don't gibe right with—something else. You're sure that Indian is dotty on his wife?"

"Absolutely," said Marion. "What is the mystery?"

"I don't know," said Sam helplessly. "Take a look at this. Ever see any one like it?"

And he took from his pocket and held out to her a yellow sheet of paper on which was printed a reproduction of photographs, together with text in flaming letters. She took it and scanned it, at first with blank face and then with puzzled attention.

"I—I don't think so," she said at last. "It looks vaguely familiar but I'm sure I've never seen him."

"Vaguely familiar," repeated Sam. "Well, the sheriff thought and I think that that's the murderer."

CHAPTER XI

THE CHALLENGE

THE PHOTOGRAPHS were none too good. This was hardly to be wondered at inasmuch as the sheet was one of those broadsides sent out by the authorities for the apprehension of criminals. The photographs were the usual profile and full view of a young man with touseled hair in hickory shirt with the collar open. The young man was good looking, with regular features. The accompanying description classified him as dark of hair, with gray eyes, about twenty-three years of age, five feet six inches tall, weighing one hundred and thirty-five pounds. Under the classification of "peculiarities" was the following:

> . . . Moves with a deceptive appearance of slowness, but with extreme grace. In reality is as quick as a snake and all are warned that he is an extraordinary skilful and fast shot with a revolver and absolutely ruthless in the use of one. This man escaped from San Carlos jail on the night of June 8, where he was held on a charge of murder. The specific crime involved the cold-blooded shooting on the streets of Campbell's Gulch, March 5, of James H. Campbell; but this is but one of many crimes of which he stands accused.

At the top of the broadside, in flaring letters, was the following legend:

> $2000 REWARD
>
> The above sum will be paid by the State of Arizona for the delivery, DEAD OR ALIVE, of the body of Peter J. Slocum, alias Pueblo Pete, to the sheriff of Virginia County, at San Carlos, or to any authorized peace officer of the State of Arizona, with proper proofs of identity.
>
> HE IS WANTED FOR MURDER!

"Have you ever seen anything like that before?" asked Sam as Marion continued to scan the sinister sheet with its brutal pictures which yet could not disguise the attractiveness of the features which they limned.

The murderous gunman it described looked like a rather serious boy with a girlish mouth. It was hard to believe that the pictures were those of a desperado whose exploits rivaled those of the almost legendary Billy the Kid.

"Yes, I've seen one of these," she replied. "Sheriff Mackay had one which he showed to father. But I don't understand what it has to do with this affair. Sheriff Mackay said that he had been traced to a point somewhere near here, but although he and a posse combed every foot of our range they never found a trace of him and he had given up looking for him before father was killed. He doesn't look like a murderer, does he?"

"No," said Sam moodily. "He doesn't. But take it from me that he is the most cold blooded killer who has been seen in these parts for twenty years. One of his exploits was the deliberate shooting down of a Mexican sheepherder who had offered him food and shelter, as the man stooped over the fire on which he was cooking a meal for Pueblo Pete."

"But why?" asked Marion, paling.

"No reason beyond the one he gave afterward in boasting of it. He said he wanted to see him kick. That's the kind of brute we have to do with, and don't you forget it."

"But," objected Marion incredulously, "how is it possible that he should be involved? You mean that Jerry, unable to accomplish these murders himself, has hired this—this monster to do them for him? But, even so, what would be the motive? And how could he have hidden successfully all this time? This country is wild and deserted, but the range is limited in extent and Sheriff Mackay searched every foot of it time and again. He never found a trace of the man."

Sam, moving around the room, had picked up a rifle, Marion's own, and stood near the front window with it in his hands, as he peered out into the vacant and peaceful meadows.

"Why did Mackay arrest Peralta?" he answered her irrelevantly. "Not simply because some one had dipped with a spoon into his supply of strychnine, significant as that fact might be. There's plenty who have strychnine and any one of them might have dipped out a spoonful.

But in Peralta's case there was at least one of his family who was in intimate contact with the Cowpers."

"His niece? You mean she must have poisoned my father?"

"I mean that Mackay had an idea she might have done so. It couldn't have been Jerry, because Jerry was at the mission preparing for his marriage. It could have been the niece, and it is evident that Mackay acted on that theory when he arrested Peralta."

"But why then did he not arrest the niece?"

Sam frowned, debating some point with himself, and almost at once, without waiting for his answer, Marion sprang to her feet with an impatient gesture.

"I think it is all nonsense!" she cried. "It may be that this desperado is and has been in hiding here all the time, but I refuse to believe that either Jerry or Mrs. Jerry are involved except unwittingly and unwillingly. He may have terrorized them. He may have stolen the poison and in some way substituted it for sugar which was put in father's toddy. Maybe the señorita was tricked to make the substitution and he afterward used that as a hold upon her and upon poor Jerry. But one thing I will not believe and that is that Jerry had a hand in killing his father. And right there is a point against your theory. If the señorita actually did the poisoning she certainly did not shoot Mr. Cowper, for that was done with a six-shooter by an expert marksman. A Mexican girl, cloistered all her life, could not shoot like that."

Sam shrugged his shoulders.

"Well," he said, "what's your theory then?"

"I think," said Marion thoughtfully, "that it may have been the señorita who used the poison, tricked by this horrible creature. Probably he may have been in hiding all this time either in Peralta's cabin or nearby, known to Peralta. He would be afraid, I think, to betray the man. Possibly Mackay had some such idea, especially after the murders, and that is what he meant by saying that it might be good for Peralta to be in jail."

"I think you're getting warm," said Sam. "If you ask me, I say that Peralta is safer in jail than he would be anywhere else and that, now that Mackay is dead and there is no longer any evidence sufficient to hold him, he will be set free and will step out of that jail into the deadliest peril. It will be first ourselves. Then Peralta will follow, and after that I presume that our man will be safe—unless he still must dispose of Jerry. But Jerry, all along, is the stumbling block."

"He must be only a tool," argued Marion. "He is held, most likely, by the same fear for his wife as she herself suffers. They are both under the thumb of that terrible creature."

"Possibly," said Sam. "If he is in hiding it would explain everything but one thing—that's the motive for piling up these risks. Why does he stop here to wipe us all out?"

"You think he is doing that?"

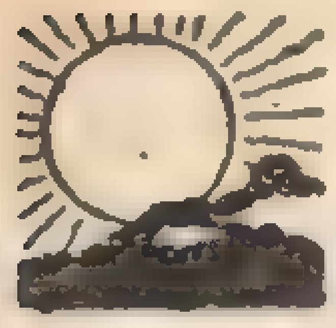
There was something like fear in Marion's voice. She was ordinarily courageous to an extraordinary degree, but this piling of murder on murder was beginning to daunt her. Nor could she imagine what object the escaped criminal could have, other than sheer maniacal blood lust, in designing further attack upon herself and Sam Hasbrook.

"I think," said Sam grimly, "that we are under siege right now and that our chance of getting out of here is as slim as anything could be. Yet—if I'm right and Mackay was right—the best thing would be to bust whoever shows up with a .30-30 from this window. Only—suppose we were wrong! That'd put us—me, at least—in a hole I'd not like to be in. I'd give something pretty to be as sure as I want to be."

"As sure of what?" asked Marion half angrily.

Her nerves were suffering under the continual strain of expectation of she hardly knew what. When to this anxiety was added what seemed a deliberate attitude of mystery on the part of Sam, she felt herself goaded to exasperation against him. Yet, at the same time there was a comforting knowledge of his competence as he stood grimly by the window with her rifle in the hollow of his elbow, as he scanned the stretch of meadow before the house.

It was growing late afternoon now and the sun was low, casting long shadows of the farther cliffs down into the valley. He continued to brood out upon the scene, stern and patient, and she crept closer to him to stand beside him and join with him in looking out.



FOR SOME minutes she warmed herself in the comforting sense of his nearness to her and then she suddenly became tense as she saw a distant movement in the long shadows far out in the valley. The rudely marked road, hardly more than beaten ruts in the sage and grass of the meadow, wound from before the cabin out toward the stream and the cliffs on its farther side. A half mile away the shadows of the rocks were cast on it, but despite the dimness of the light under the rampart she observed what was clearly a horseman moving slowly along the road. But whoever he was he came openly and at a serene, slow jog, as if his errand were open and innocent.

The fact cheered her. A man riding thus must be some wayfarer who would pass in front of the cabin and probably stop there as the day drew on to a close; the next habitation was miles away. That meant another added to their force and, better than that, it meant one who could ride on and fetch help to them, unless . . . The alternative suggested itself. Would their unknown and mysterious enemy permit any one to leave the cabin?

Probably not, and yet another man would be a help. Even one like their adversary would hesitate to attack them if they were so reenforced. She recalled that hitherto the mysterious criminal, Pueblo Pete or not, had taken no great risk. In one case he had fired on Jerry's father from ambush, himself unseen. His next murder had been that of Mackay and here he had had the advantage of partial surprise. He had, to be sure, then ridden coolly up to the house and shot down the two Englishmen, but here it was evident that they had been taken by surprise and had been unable to offer any resistance. They had not even drawn their weapons.

She watched the gradually nearing figure as it jogged onward and then a thought struck her suddenly. She turned and left Sam watching steadfastly while she sought a window which gave a view of the cliff where Jerry was wont to maintain his vigil. One glance was enough for her. The halfbreed was not to be seen. She hurried back to Sam's side and found him staring out with a singularly grim frown on his face.

"You probably know her when you see her," he said. "Take a look at her."

Marion looked. The rider was now out of the shadow, not more than a quarter mile away and jogging on as before. One glance was quite enough.

"Why!" she cried wonderingly. "It is the señorita—the señora—Mrs. Cowper. What on earth is she doing here?"

"That's to be seen," said Sam metallically.

He fingered the rifle and halfway brought it up to his shoulder, his eyes on the slim, graceful figure in long skirt and black scarf who sat, rather awkwardly riding a roping saddle in side saddle fashion. He set his teeth hard and swore under his breath while Marion watched him with a chill wonder growing on her. Suddenly he banged the rifle angrily down against the floor and left it leaning near the window.

"Damn it!" he growled. "If I only dared chance it!"

"What do you mean?" cried Marion. "Were you going to shoot her?"

"That's what I ought to do," snarled Sam, "but I don't quite dare. I'm not entirely sure. If I was I'd shoot her like a dog."

She stared at him as if thinking him a little bit mad. He stood there for an instant, busy with sinister preparations. He stooped and tested the loop that bound the bottom of his holster to his thigh, tested the slide of the black butt of his gun and the exact position of the cutout notch around the trigger guard. Then he drew the weapon, sprung the cylinder and twirled it with a keen eye on the caps of the shells. Finally he snapped the cylinder into place and dropped the gun into the sheath, testing it to see once more that it was loose.

"What are you going to do?" She spoke with dry lips. "What is the matter?"

"I'm going to take the chance Mackay took," said Sam, soberly. "We may be wrong—both of us—and I can't afford to make a mistake. But if we're right, it'll be a worse mistake in the end—unless—"

"What under heaven are you talking about?" cried Marion. "That girl? You're not afraid of her?"

"By the gods, but I am," said Sam. "I only pray that I'm as fast as they say I am—and faster. I'll need to be."

He was walking with a peculiar, catlike stride toward the door and he now began to unfasten it. As Marion stood watching him, speechless, he turned sternly to her.

"Listen," he said. "Take up that rifle and stand at the window. I hope you're a good shot. If I go down, shoot! And shoot to kill, without thought of mercy. God help you if you don't."

"Shoot who?" stammered Marion. She put her hand out and groped for the weapon.

"Whoever there is to shoot," snarled Sam. "I'm going out there and I probably won't come back. But if you shoot, and shoot straight, you'll be all right. Goodby!"

He had opened the door. He cast a quick glance outside and stepped from the stoop toward that spot where he had previously seen the hoofprints of the horse which had carried the man who shot down the Englishmen. At that spot, he knew, he was safe from ambushed foes. Here he stood and waited. The woman on the horse came onward until they were no more than fifty yards apart. He stood immobile, feet a bit apart, the slightest bend in his knees, motionless but with every muscle tensed in a strange readiness. Behind him Marion, forgetting what he had told her, left the window and came to the door, the rifle held by the barrel with its butt on the floor.

The woman spoke—in Spanish.

"Señor," she called anxiously, "have you seen my husband?"

Sam's ears fairly pricked. He stood silent, unmoving. A queer, pale light was blazing in his eyes, and as he watched, the same light showed in those of the woman. Marion saw it, but Sam did not. He looked at the rider's hands. One of them, half lifted in appeal to him, dropped to her side. Instantly his own fingers flexed and shot upward. Marion saw a pale hand strike from the folds of the black skirt in lightning movement and the world around her blazed with fire and smoke and thunder.

She stood frozen to immobility for a second, the scene imprinted on her eyes as though by a lightning flash. She saw Sam standing in the smoke of his gun, saw the gun spit fire and smoke again; she saw the black clad woman on the horse lurch and lean forward, the smoking gun sliding down the horse's mane. Then the horse reared and she slid from his back and tumbled in a grotesque heap to the ground. And Sam swayed as he stood, gun ready for a third shot if it should be necessary.

A wail shattered the quiet, after the blast of firing. There came a rush of furious, spitting madness, and a man leaped at Sam as he tottered there, blood staining his shoulder. Marion saw, through the red haze of horror, the clumsy figure of the halfbreed Jerry Cowper as he threw himself furiously on Sam. She acted instinctively in a sudden whirl of protective feeling, darting out to seize the shrieking halfbreed as he clutched at Sam's throat. Even as Sam went down she threw an arm about the man's waist and dragged at him, wrestling him from his hold. He came away, screaming; and suddenly went limp in her astounded grasp, weeping in great, tearing sobs. Sam, half risen, on his unwounded arm, looked up into Marion's thunderstruck countenance.

"My God!" cried Marion. "It's a woman!"

For an instant Sam was stupefied. Then his face cleared and a grim smile spread on the pale cheeks.

"Hell's delights," he said profanely. "A woman! That's the answer!"

"Two women," stammered Marion.

He dragged himself slowly to his feet. The halfbreed lay now in a huddled heap on the ground, and the contours of a woman were apparent in her present attitude. Sam stalked uncertainly to the other figure stretched grotesquely where it had fallen. He turned it over and tore the scarf from the head. Unkempt hair, black and short, appeared.

"This one's a man," he said weakly. "Pueblo Pete."

CHAPTER XII

AN EXPLANATION

IT WAS several weeks later that Sam Hasbrook reported at the offices of Intermountain Utilities, ready to render a report of his late mission. In the interval, after some necessary delay in getting to one, he had been first laid up in hospital with a bullet hole in the muscles of his shoulder just around the armpit. That had healed nicely, assisted by the devoted care of Marion Sturgis. After that, both of them had been required to give evidence regarding sundry matters in which they had participated. Finally they had come back to civilization.

And Sam now stood before his chief, who invited him eagerly to take a seat. The chief wanted to hear that report, since the items of the story that had come to him were badly garbled and did not make sense.

"Well," said Sam modestly, "here we are and we came out all right. But I'll say we were lucky."

"Luck hell!" scoffed the chief. "You outshot Pueblo Pete, fair and square. An even break and you beat him to it."

"Maybe," said Sam thoughtfully. "It was fast shooting and it had to be. And I'm thinking yet that if he hadn't been counting on surprising me he'd maybe have hurried a bit more and fetched me cold. You see, he didn't dream that I knew he wasn't a woman."

"What beats me," said the chief, "is how you knew he was a man and Pueblo Pete. I don't quite get it all but it's clear that you must have made some pretty shrewd deductions."

"Well, I can't say it was all that," said Sam. "When I got there I was sure in my own mind, just as those two poor Britishers were, that young Jerry Cowper was the downy bird behind it. Naturally we all got the story from Miss Marion and had to go on her say-so entirely. But Miss Marion was a sure enough smart young woman and I was quite ready to take what she said as gospel."

"I gather that she made quite an impression on more than one of you," the chief said, grinning.

"She surely did, sir. Now, what she said, together with what that lawyer had dug up, suggested that young Jerry was badly mixed up in it. But he had an alibi and a perfectly good one, and Miss Marion allowed he wasn't the sort to do such things. Of course, being half Indian, it'd be hard to judge his disposition, but I've known enough halfbreeds to know that they are just as likely to be harmless as to be snakes, and this guy seemed to stack up as a rather timid sort, weak, maybe, but not mean. He seemed to me to be an accessory, all right, though probably not the principal.

"When I got the dope on the actual killings, I had to rule Jerry out again. He wasn't there to use the poison or to shoot his daddy. But if he didn't do that he surely wouldn't have committed the crimes that followed. Over and above his alibi, which was good, was the fact that he couldn't shoot well; and it was a dead certainty that old Jerry, at least, had been killed by a crack shot with a six-shooter. And, of course, that suggested Pueblo Pete, who was supposed to have hidden out somewheres up there. But for the life of me I couldn't figure any reason why Pete, hiding for his life, should go out of his way to commit totally motiveless crimes. Beside which, there was the sheriff. I'd heard of Mackay and I knew that he was no fool. And if Mackay hadn't been able to locate Pete in that limited range, it was a pretty sure bet that Pete wasn't there.

"So there we were. Jerry had the motive but not the opportunity. That he was an accessory was sure, because he was watching every move of Marion and ourselves, undoubtedly for the sake of being able to warn or inform some confederate. Naturally, it looked like Jerry was a fraud and that his mother, perhaps, was not married to old Jerry or if she was, he was not her son. Now that old Jerry was dead there was no way to prove all that, of course. His squaw had died also without saying a word.

"On the other hand, it was certain that the claim was fraudulent from the way old Jerry acted when remorse got him and also by reason of what Marion overheard when she took old Jerry's letter to him. But she was sure that they had referred to the person who knew the secret as 'she'. Marion thought it meant his squaw, the boy's mother, but I wasn't so sure. There was another 'she' on the scene and for the first time I took to considering the niece of old Juan Peralta.

"There was more than one queer thing about that niece. Firstly, it seemed to be a surprise that Juan had a niece. But supposing he had one, it seemed queer to me that a young and rather high toned Mexican girl would arrive to live with an aged, poverty stricken bachelor uncle without any one even accompanying her as a chaperon. It simply isn't done in decent Mexican society.

"And she must have been decent society because she was white—that is to say, if she was genuine. Only about ten per cent. of Mexicans are pure white and the very fact separates them from the herd. Now Juan, though he was fairly light, was a *cholo* just the same. He might have had a lily white relative, but it didn't seem likely, and it was even less likely that an aristocratic white niece would come to live with a *cholo* uncle who was as poor as a rat. That's all obvious now, but it doesn't seem to have struck any one else at the time—except Mackay. And I suspect that Mackay reasoned just like I did when he finally got started, only he reasoned faster and more certainly.

"AS I see it, Mackay saw these things too—at least when the murders commenced—and he reasoned right to the point. But one thing stumped him and made him go slow. Jerry Cowper had fallen for that niece and they were going to marry. If the niece was a man disguised as a girl there was no sense in that. Jerry must have known the fact. But Mackay knew, and I knew through Marion, that Jerry was apparently genuinely in love with the niece; and Jerry was obviously not the type to pretend love so as to fool an astute sheriff and a shrewd girl. He was no actor, and that's why he kept so much to himself.

"Mackay was stumped and so was I. But Mackay went ahead. There was something phony about the niece. More than that, white Mexican girls don't fall for halfbreed boys. If this one did, it was a dead cinch that she fell for him because she knew he was due to be Viscount Maudley as soon as his father was gone. And that gave us again a motive, this time added to opportunity. It all fitted in. If the girl married Jerry she would be 'my lady,' as soon as old Jerry was dead. And old Jerry's consternation when he was told that 'she' knew the secret fitted in too. 'She' was obviously the señorita, and to prevent old Jerry from spilling the secret of the fraud she poisoned Mr. Sturgis and then followed and shot old Jerry. I could see all that as clearly as Mackay did. And it sure shed a light on the character of Jerry's 'wife'.

"But the señorita was not only a cold-blooded murderess. She was, it seemed, a dead shot with a six-shooter and not so good with a rifle. Women are apt to be better with a rifle than with a six-shooter. On the other hand, many an expert with a six-shooter isn't so good with a rifle. Again we had a suggestion of a man disguised as a woman.

"Mackay, as I say, acted. He arrested Juan Peralta on the ground that some one had used his strychnine, a perfectly senseless move until it appeared from what he hinted that he had shut Peralta up, not so much for what he had done, but to save him from what might be done to him. He knew that Peralta would be on the list of those to go. Peralta knew too much. But as a Mexican, he was in deadly terror and would not talk. His very fear, however, betrayed its source and cause, and Mackay went out to arrest the niece whom he now more than suspected of being the missing Pueblo Pete. Pueblo had taken that disguise and lay secure while they combed the hills for him. We know now, what we then only guessed, that Pete had terrorized Peralta into acquiescence. Remember how no Mexican could ever be got to betray Billy the Kid, though he used to kill Mexicans almost for amusement? Afraid! And so was Peralta afraid.

"The rest follows inevitably, though still there was a catch in it. We couldn't yet see why all this was necessary. Even Pueblo Pete wouldn't risk everything by wanton murder. The only explanation was that neither he nor Jerry knew that we did not know the truth about Jerry, whatever it was. Old Jerry might have told Sturgis and either might have told Marion. Marion in turn might have told us. Therefore it was necessary to get rid of all of us. You know how Mackay was shot down, beaten to the draw. Again it was a corking shot that did that—and no woman shoots that way.

"Then, in spite of my warning to them not to admit a soul, the two Britishers were shot down while we were away. And every sign pointed to the fact that they were astonished and taken by surprise. That meant, after my warning, that a woman had shot them down. And yet there was still that stumbling block. Poor simple Jerry was in love with that woman, and if she was a man, there was no sense at all in that. Yet he was so much in love with her that he acquiesced in wholesale murder and even aided in it. Even the murder of his father—though old Jerry could never have inspired much affection. Now, I could understand that if it was genuine love; the blind, unreasoning, primitive love that such a poor, lonely soul as Jerry might bestow on some superior creature. But Jerry couldn't love another man that way.

"You see where we stood? On the one hand everything suggested that a man had done all this. But to both of us it was certain that Jerry's wife had done it. Therefore Jerry's wife was a man and, if so, that man was Pueblo Pete. But if it was a man, Jerry couldn't be infatuated to the degree that it was certain he was. Mackay was stumped; sufficiently so that he went alone to arrest 'her' or 'him' as the case might be, though if his conviction were true he knew he was taking a terrible risk. He took that risk and paid for it with his life.

"Yet I was still uncertain, just as he was. It *might* be a woman after all. And when the señorita came riding I was still unable to make up my mind. If I had been positive, I would have blown her off her horse with a rifle from behind the window and not have suffered a qualm. But I wasn't certain, and if I had shot her down defenseless, to find that she was a woman, this country wouldn't have held me. I did as Mackay did, but this time I had the advantage that Mackay lacked. Pete ambushed Mackay because he knew that Mackay suspected him. He got the jump on him. But he didn't know I suspected him and he came on, thinking to take me by surprise. Instead, I was ready and downed him when he went for his gun.

"Well, you know the rest. When he went down, out charged Jerry, attacking like a wildcat. Marion hauled him off and found out the secret; that 'Jerry' was a girl all along, trained by her old scamp of a father to act the boy from infancy. But he couldn't train sex out of her and she had fallen for Pueblo Pete. When she calmed down, being half Indian, she got hold of herself quicker than a white girl would have done and finally told us the story, sullenly but with entire indifference. She simply didn't care, now that Pete was gone.

"She had fallen for him. He had known from the first that she was a girl. He started to bully her the first time he saw her and that was on the day he sneaked into the country and before the alarm was out for him. He grabbed the 'boy', as he thought Jerry was, and, mauling him around in the gentle way Pete had with folks, discovered what Marion afterward did. And that gave him an idea. If a girl could pass as a boy he could pass as a girl. He changed his tune, cunning devil as he was, and with a little soft soap and tender stuff had poor Jerry hypnotized. It was she who got his costume from Barton and it was not much of a job to frighten poor old Peralta into abject surrender. His 'niece' duly appeared on the scene and complacently made love to Jerry while the posses rode all around him.

"Yet even so it seemed senseless, and a thing they could never have gotten away with. But then Jerry calmly outlined the plan Pueblo Pete had schemed out. It was a grand one. He intended to kill ruthlessly every one who would be likely to identify the actual heir, Jerry. That included Peralta, of course, whom Mackay saved by locking him up, Sturgis and his daughter who knew the 'boy' and might be called upon to identify 'him', Jerry's father who was to be given no chance of blowing the affair when in his cups, the two Englishmen—"

"Why them?" the chief broke in. "They had never seen him."

"He didn't know. But he would see them in England. If they knew the heir they would speak. For Pete intended to kill every one who could differentiate between himself and Jerry, quietly walk out of the country and sail for England to claim the title. On the way Pete would become Jerry and Jerry would shift into the role of the señorita, now Señora Jerry. They would simply exchange identities and live happily ever after, Pete as Viscount Maudley, and the infatuated Jerry as Lady Cowper."

"It sure was," said the chief appreciatively. "What became of Jerry? She ought to have got a-plenty."

"Well," said Sam, "you know how folks are out this way. After all, she was a woman, and when she got into her natural clothes, darned if she was a bad looking one. And she hadn't known of Pete's intention to kill her daddy. And she was sure nutty over the damned scoundrel. So, being what they are, folks figured she'd had enough and they let her go. And, just see how queerly things work out. You know, she's the last of the lot of the Maudley outfit. The title lapses, of course. She don't get that; but darned if she doesn't come into a lot of money, just the same. She's fixed for life."

"Hell!" said the chief disgustedly. "*She's* fixed for life! But there's the Sturgis girl and I reckon she comes out without a thing. Well, we owe her plenty and we don't let our own folks go to the wall. We'll have to take care of Miss Marion."

"Oh, well, that's all right," said Sam slowly. "I reckon she'll make out all right. You see—Mackay told me she was in love with some other fellow just before he was killed. I was worried about that, so when I got a chance I asked her was it true. And what do you know about it? She said it was. And the other fellow was *me!* So I guess she's sort of—well—fixed for life herself."

"You lucky son of a gun!" said the chief.

The CAMP-FIRE

A free-to-all meeting place for readers, writers and adventurers

The Weight-Lifter

HEREWITH, comrades, we are tossing that strong man's log into the Camp-Fire blaze. A 12" x 12" x 35' stick is just good kindling for the gang. Our expert figured that the foreman who stood six feet from the end, while three men carried the other end, lifted 887 pounds. We've been so deluged with variations that Comrade Conant must be right: we needed a physics expert.

I noted in a recent copy of *Adventure* mention of the button of the original American Legion. I, too, have one of those buttons and the reference gave me many pleasant thoughts of other times and places. This helped considerably as I am now confined to bed with pulmonary tuberculosis.

In a later copy I read Mr. E. E. Harriman's letter about his strong carpenter. Why take our good friend for a ride because he neglected the three inches at end of timber and therefore got five extra pounds for his man? Three inches is too small to be considered by a man of the wide open spaces of the West. Your comment mentioned mathematics expert when unquestionably you needed a physics expert. —ALBERT D. CONANT.

Lore And Legend

APROPOS of the snake letter by Mr. W. A. Posey, of Birmingham, two months back, Mr. E. D. Smith of Atlanta has kindly forwarded us the following clipping—from the Atlanta *Constitution*, September 24:

ILLINOIS DOCTOR DECLARES SNAKES BREAK IN PIECES

Dr. J. C. Sheifley, of Tennessee, Ill., a subscriber of the *Constitution*, takes issue with a statement made in the newspaper's issue of September 7 which alleged that such a thing as a joint snake does not exist.

The statement referred to follows:

"The tales of glass snakes that break in pieces if struck are entirely mythological."

Dr. Sheifley asserts that though he "is not a naturalist, I know snakes," and further claims that he has seen scores of the so-called joint-snakes break up when not even struck but when the earth is struck not far from them.

The doctor in a letter to the *Constitution* gives a lengthy résumé of experiences and experiments he has had with various types of snakes and declares that any naturalist who really knows snakes will, with him, take issue with the statement.

Our Error

THROUGH last-minute changes in cover plans the October 1st cover painting was attributed to Hubert Rogers. Mr. Rogers drew the heading illustrations for that number, but the cover was painted by John Drew. For the omission of credit to Mr. Drew on the contents page we are certainly sorry.

And—

Incidentally, while you are turning back to October 1st to set the records straight, it might be well to keep on turning back through the year. In a month we are going to follow our old custom of inviting your votes on favorite stories of the year. December 15th we shall print a complete list of all the fiction that has appeared in *Adventure* in 1929. Hold your votes till then—and then let us have them promptly. Readers' votes figure importantly in the selection of future stories . . .

Sharks

A CAMP-FIRE discussion continued from July 1st. First we shall hear from Max H. Carson, District Engineer of the U. S. Geological Survey in Honolulu, H. I.

Mr. Charles Gilson's story of his swim at Waikiki in the Camp-Fire of July 1st is of a type with many other stories circulated concerning these islands.

In the first place it is possible to swim beyond the reef at Waikiki though the water is quite shallow at low tide in some places. In the second place, although the coral is sharp the Hawaiians and Japanese walk around on it barefoot, and except in an extremely heavy surf during a southerly storm, the worst anyone could expect from contact with it would be a few unpleasant scratches. In the third place the octopi and squid, though fairly plentiful along the outer edge of the reef, are small, seldom exceeding a weight of three or four pounds and are hunted for food. They catch them with short spears and I have seen an Hawaiian dive into about seven feet of water and bring out a three pound octopus on the end of a three foot spear. The large octopi are farther out in deep water—water so deep that no swimmer could get near them, deep sea fishing tackle being necessary to take them. And in the fourth place, while there are some sharks in Hawaiian waters, they are *not* man killers. This fact is so well established that there are old Hawaiian legends explaining why the shark never attacks a man. The sharks will take a dead body quickly enough, but as long as the swimmer keeps moving around the sharks will not touch him. There are, of course, a number of different kinds of sharks, some more vicious than others, but the old time Hawaiian swims in shark infested waters without any hesitation, though the white man recoils from them just as he does from snakes and for the same reason.

I have frequently watched groups of Hawaiians swim ashore from a sampan off the windward coast of Molokai to gather shell fish, and I have sometimes accompanied them. No thought was ever given to sharks, although we had occasionally seen sharks swimming by. So I say, maybe they bite at Aden or Sydney but at Waikiki they are just interesting sights, and very, very rare. —MAX H. CARSON.

Reply by Charles Gilson:

The subject under discussion, due to a very interesting article by Mr. Anderson about Aden, was the question of sharks in shallow water. In November, 1905, as I stated, a large white shark was caught at Honolulu close under Diamond Head. The aquarium authorities built a concrete tank for him, where I saw him before he died.

I am well aware that all over the world natives of all kinds bathe and dive in shark infested waters. Certain white men, such as yourself and Mr. Anderson (who used to bathe at Aden) have that contempt for the shark that is bred of familiarity. But surely that does not alter the fact that there are occasional casualties—enough at any rate for a one-armed or one-legged beggar to be a common sight in Aden, and for the British authorities in certain places to prohibit natives diving for money. Anyway, when I saw the gigantic shark in question, never having seen a white shark before and having a greater dread of the animal than contempt, I confess to certain emotions when I remembered that I was swimming outside the reef on the day he was caught.

As for the poisonous nature of coral, my informant was a medical man in Honolulu, who had been some years in Hawaii, and his statement bore out only what I had heard before. And surely, too, there's a difference between an experienced Hawaiian fisherman walking barefoot on a reef and an inexperienced swimmer floundering straight into the midst of coral. My anecdote may have suggested that I wanted to exaggerate a danger; but the fact remains that in those days bathers at Waikiki did not go outside the reef, and I was warned when I did. —CHARLES GILSON.

NO-SEE-UM

(*A Tribute*)

The Indians named him succinctly and well,
No-see-um;
He slips through the screens like a bat out of hell—
No-see-um!
He thrives on the smudges that most pests abhor;
Where fly-dope lies thickest, he swarms by the score,
Apparently pleased, for he buzzes for more!
No-see-um!

In contrast mosquitoes seem gentle and mild—
No-see-um!
The moose-fly is tame as a lately spanked child—
No-see-um!
The black fly's a duffer; the gnat is inane;
The wiles of the wasp and the hornet are vain;
The chiggers are futile as castles in Spain!
No-see-um!

A wee winged demon, relentless and grim,
No-see-um;
Creed, color and caste are as nothing to him,
No-see-um!
He burrows through breeches and shirts of O.D.
To banquet *ad lib.* on the elbow or knee
Of native and outlander, guide—or mere me—
No-see-um!

Then hail to that peerless, omnipotent pest,
No-see-um!
For grit and aggression he shadows the rest—
No-see-um!
He tunnels, head down, through the hardiest hide
And never gives up till he's garnished inside,
Then fades in thin air—but the itchings abide!
No-see-um!

—HAROLD WILLARD GLEASON

Name-Of-The-Month Contest

PURELY as a speculative game, *Adventure*, as announced last issue, will soon print the details of its contest for a name for the new month that would result from adoption of the much discussed calendar of thirteen 28-day months. Not that the winner of our contest will have his suggestion adopted by the world—or even that the new calendar will appear in our generation. It's just a good guessing game.

A Lost Trail

IT WILL take a real old-timer to pick up this man's whereabouts from his last established record, almost fifty years past. Forward any information directly to Mr. Payne.

For several years I have been making an extended search for an uncle of mine who was in the British Army and deserted or disappeared in 1881. Perhaps some of your readers are veterans of the Zulu War of 1879, or are acquainted with veterans of that war.

I have corresponded with the British War Office on this subject, but they can give me no information of any value. His name was Michael Feeney, Number 15473, and he was a driver in the Second Royal Engineers. The War Office records state he deserted in Africa in 1881 after having served throughout the Zulu War.

I would be greatly pleased if I could get in touch with some veteran of that War or any former member of the Royal Engineers at that time. Hoping this letter will not be out of place in the Camp-Fire.—JOSEPH PAYNE, JR., 509 Main St., Delta, Colorado.

The Old Legion In Chicago

WE'VE heard from New York and Philadelphia, and it's only fair to give the floor to Chicago—on the subject of the pre-war American Legion, especially as Major Baldwin's reminiscences are so full of interest.

I guess I am entitled to a membership in the outfit; I was attracted to the American Legion in '15 and made a pest out of myself getting my friends in. I think that there were about 50,000 of us scattered around the U. S. In 1916 in June we had a Preparedness Parade. We stuck an ad in the *Daily News* asking members of the Legion to meet at a certain hour and location on the Lake Front; we had dug up the "necessary" and got a banner made with the emblem on it and got a marching space assigned.

Well, about one hundred and fifty, if memory serves, turned out; we got acquainted with each other and as the parade disbanded we held a convention under the Metropolitan Elevated structure on Canal Street and perfected a permanent organization. The Sherman House management and the Hotel Harding gave us the use of their parlors and we grew; then "Teddy," our idol, came to Chicago and we had 200 seats reserved for us by the courtesy of Ald. Guy Guernsey. Sat up till 2 A.M. in the Hamilton Club waiting for the tickets to come from the printer. We got arm bands made with the emblem on—got mine yet—and 35,000 people cheered for half an hour when "Teddy" appeared on the platform.

Jan. 1, 1917, the U. S. took over The American Legion with its roster and nothing was done; early in the year I got hot and wrote Newton D. Baker, Secty. War, and in about those words asked him: What th' hell! He replied via Adjt. Gen. McCain, who sent me an application blank for the Officers' Reserve Corps with a suggestion to apply for a Commission. Having been an engineer in a couple of dozen States for twenty-five years, I filled her out and became a 90-day wonder; sent me to Ft. Leavenworth for training; ruined some good farming country digging trenches learned "Squads East" and a lot of other more or less useful stuff. Got recommended for a battalion as Major in a Railway Regiment; got set on "inactive" status, went into Signal Corps—there to Col. Riche's office; made military maps, drilled troops in the old Essany Studio. Got them ready for the National Army. We had 138 men waiting to be called to camp—taught 'em bayonet drill and worked with Dept. of Justice running down spies. We got eight sergeantcies when our gang got to camp. Went before a civilian board for reinstatement to rank (all $1 year men overpaid); went to mat: won three falls—passed a hard boiled Army Surgeon, Col. Derining, a regular fellow; got a special recommendation. Three days to go, would have been on way; they touched off the Armistice, ruined the War.

About three or four days before the passing on of Col. Roosevelt I wrote him regarding the reincarnation of the American Legion, using the discharged soldiers as a nucleus. With his characteristic promptness he replied and I have given that letter sanctuary in the Chicago Historical Society among the Roosevelt matters. I am a member of Marseilles Post No. 235 Illinois, also was a member Oak Park 15. I guess this lets me in; if A.S.H. is alive give him my regards; if not, I'll see him some day—along with "Teddy." — ROBT. H. BALDWIN, Hon. Disch. Maj. Engineers.

All Honor To Them

THE OLD-TIMERS. Now and then a letter like this comes in:

> Dear Editor,
>
> I have been reading *Adventure* since about 1910. Why have you stopped printing Couzens, and others of the old brigade? I like your magazine still, and read every copy, but I miss the old boys who used to give me so much pleasure.—LESLIE VANDERVOORT, 15 Williams Street, Salem, Massachusetts.

COMRADE, it is life. Out here in the office, where all may see, we have a tablet that bears the names of our loved and honored authors who have taken the last, long trail into the Sunset. Couzens' name is on the list. That is why we have printed nothing by him in the course of several years.

Authors are but mortal. They live, laugh, love, sin, work—sometimes—and because they go more intensely into this curious puzzle called life, than most bond salesmen, for instance, they do not live very long. Of course, there is George Bernard Shaw; and of course there was Hardy, and Anatole France. But all these were philosophers. By and large, a philosopher lives long—and has a punk time. A woman or man who delves in the emotions—sincerely—usually drops dead at forty-nine.

The old heart will sympathize only so long.

It is a curious business, this writing. I have done just enough of it, myself, so I can vault from the editorial chair and get along with most writers, on their side of the fence. (There may be a very few writers who now will wish to mail me bichloride of mercury tablets . . .) But I can understand just what a hell-and-heaven business it all is. And because of the very nature of the chap (even the most objectionable of them is not a beast) I want to put in a word about the old-timers on *Adventure*.

Every man who ever has written for *Adventure* at any time, has been asked to send us stories. The only ones who have failed to answer are dead. Beside the old-timers, we have now all of the best men who have been writing adventure stories—all of them. That is not a boast; it is a plain, unadorned fact. Let me show you. I shall not go into history, but look only toward the issues that are to come—issues I already have scheduled for my own enjoyment—and yours. (Probably I get more real zest out of *Adventure*, than any one of you possibly can. That's why they let me sit here in this great private office, and clasp hands with the whole wide world.)

Old-Timers' Stories A-Coming

OF COURSE, you've read the Harold Lamb yarn in this number; the third of the series by B. M. Bower (whose Western novels have been immensely popular for two decades); the William West Winter novel; and the cipher yarn by Ared White. If not, go back and try them—and don't miss the Afghan serial by Talbot Mundy, the man who wrote that most famous of adventure stories (in this locale), "King of the Khyber Rifles."

In the issues to come, these tales are waiting—to give you many a pleasant hour:

A Hashknife serial, by Tut (need I spell out his name?) Also a couple or three shorts.

By George Surdez, a real saga of the French Foreign Legion, "They March From Yesterday." This is a serial novel, of course.

General Ared White goes on with his cipher novelettes, each one getting a trifle harder to solve than its predecessor.

Harold Lamb takes us back to Medieval Asia. J. D. Newsom comes along with another of his Legionnaire novelettes.

General Rafael de Nogales, fiery and interesting adventurer, relates a series of absorbing tales of battle and intrigue.

Arthur O. Friel writes three spooky tales of the upper Amazon. Pedro and Lourenço—remember them?

H. Bedford-Jones contributes two novelettes of the South Seas.

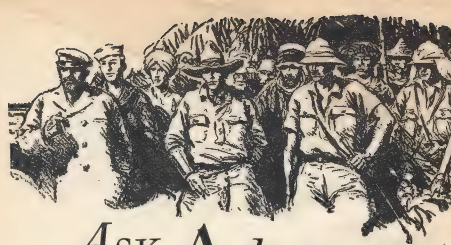
Karl Detzer tells more of the fire companies in Chicago.

Thomson Burtis grins at us from the clouds.

R. E. Hamilton, William Corcoran, Bill Adams, Major Charles Gilson, George E. Holt, Walt Coburn, Barry Lyndon, Louis Lacy Stevenson, Rafael Sabatini, Major Malcolm Wheeler-Nicholson, Fiswoode Tarleton, Hugh Pendexter, E. S. Dellinger, Harold B. Say, Frank J. Schindler, Bill Fort, L. Patrick Greene, Allan V. Elston, Edmund Littell, Henry La Cossitt, Fred Jackson, and F. R. Buckley—all are coming soon.

All these will appear in the next few issues, and with them, of course, will be stories from a number of younger writers. *Adventure* prides itself upon starting several—or many—young writers each year, upon the road to popularity and success. Except for the annual Old-Timers' Issue, there never is a copy of *Adventure* which does not have a right good story by a newcomer. Watch and see!

Meantime, hats off to the real blood-and-iron brigade, the Old-Timers we have read and loved! —ANTHONY M. RUD



ASK Adventure

For free information and services you can't get elsewhere

Krag

HOW to transform one into a hunting rifle.

Request:—"1. I bought a Krag rifle from National Rifle Association, and I would like to know how to work down the stock and what tools are needed for such work.

2. What kind of a front sight do you think is best for the Krag?

3. Is any special tool required?

4. What kind of a back sight is best?

5. What is the reason that the military sights are no good for hunting?

6. Where could I get tools for checkering? What is the cost?

By the way, I got the Membership application blank for the N. R. A. from you, and I want to tell you it is the best three dollars I ever invested."

—LUDVIG RIBICH, P. O. Redore, Minn.

Reply, by Mr. Donegan Wiggins:—1. For working over the stock of your Krag, you will need a rasp of fine cut, a saw of fine teeth, sandpaper, walnut stain, and lots of patience.

2. For the front sight, send to the D. C. M., and get a Springfield front sight complete, then discard the blade and secure a commercial gold or ivory bead and insert it in the base, after attaching the sight to the rifle barrel. I suppose you intend to shorten the barrel to sporting length, of course. Lymans also make a fine ramp front sight for the Krag, but it's more expensive than the Government one; price $4.00.

3. No special tool is required for mounting the front sight save the file or hacksaw to cut the barrel to the length desired, a file to square the muzzle off perfectly true, and a finer file to cut the groove for the front sight base pin to fit in after the front sight base is slipped on to the barrel to hold it in place.

4. I like the Pacific sight, price $3.00, for the Krag, but think the Lyman more substantial.

5. The military sights can be used for hunting, but are too slow to catch quickly for moving deer, etc., I think; most hunters here prefer a peep rear and gold bead or ivory front one, as I do also.

6. I think you can get checkering tool from the following man, at a cost of about five dollars or so: Mr. Clyde Baker, c/o Baker & Main, North Kansas City, Mo. He also publishes a fine book on rifle repairs, alterations, etc.

I'm pleased indeed that you are suited with the N. R. A. and hope the above information will enable you to "doll up" the Krag nicely.

Horse

PICTURE of an Arabian steed.

Request:—"Once upon a time I had a horse that I refer to at times as an Arabian. I have been asked how I know that it was an Arabian. I don't *know* but I am going to describe her to you as well as I can and ask, if in your opinion, I am justified to call her so.

In color, she was white with the exception of three or four red hairs on her neck. Legs flat, long and slim. Chest narrow but deep. Hind legs rather straight and hocks a little wide. Hoofs very small and fine textured and inclined to chip off if not kept well oiled. Head refined, broad between the eyes. Eyes large and intelligent. Nostril prominent and sensitive. Withers extremely wide, so much so that I found it rather hard to stick to her bareback though I rode other horses bareback without trouble. Her hair was very short and silky, and on the legs the veins showed through even when she was in repose.

She always carried her head up in the air looking off into space, as a result of which she was prone to stub her toes on roots and things but she never really stumbled. In fact she was as sure-footed as a goat. In spite of the straight hind legs she could run down hill with all kinds of speed and ease. When she trotted in the saddle she was as smooth as a single-footer. And when she ran! Oh, boy! I've ridden some fast horses, some that I believe could beat her for speed, but for just sweet smoothness of motion I've never ridden anything like her. She didn't pound the earth; she just seemed to settle down low and skim the ground.

She was extremely temperamental. I could do anything with her. I could throw her by lifting one front leg and pushing on her shoulder, and then walk all over her or lie down on her and go to sleep. She was absolutely gentle. But if my partner or his wife came within ten yards of her she was ready to tear them apart. When turned out with other horses she would range by herself and if another horse came near her she would bite and kick the stuffing out of it. She did not go about looking for trouble, but she wanted to be left alone, and believe me she was.

She hated to jump over upright obstacles but never failed a chance to show what she could do in a broad-jump, usually when I was not expecting it. She could do over ten feet from a stand.

She had one bad habit. When she was startled she would make a leap away from the noise without looking to see what she was jumping into. One day she crashed into a tree with a branch stub that spoiled the smoothness of one hip. The last I heard of her she was dead in the bottom of a cañon in Humbolt County, California."

—Henry M. Van Depoele, Marstons Mills, Mass.

Reply, by Mr. Thomas H. Dameron:—The white Arabian, quoting General Carter, is highly prized but seldom found.

Your mare was undoubtedly Arabian. I would probably add only the following to make a perfect description of an Arabian. Let us say she had a short back, very small callosities, or maybe none on hind legs. Very small ergots on fetlocks. Check bones wide apart at the throat.

The marked features are the large lustrous eyes set far apart, short back, because they have fewer vertebræ in the back and tail.

Then her other characteristics: head up, looking ahead, broad jumping, and temperament. The Arab judged his horse by endurance, by being able to see far ahead night or day, and by jumping from a stand (ten feet on first forward spring was heavy, fifteen feet he was strong, over fifteen feet he was of superior quality). Temperament: an Arabian can not be fed oats in any quantity since it "goes to the head". The albuminoid called avenine causes this. Its effects are minimized by crushing or grinding the oats.

They are loving in disposition because they are reared and kept in the tent with the rest of the family. I wish I had a dozen like yours.

Homesteading

THE best part of the West for this purpose.

Request:—"1. Is there any good land for homesteading in Western U. S.?

2. Are there any advantages offered to World War Veterans?

3. How much does it cost for the first papers?

4. Would you kindly forward any other information about Homesteading that is available?"

—Earl E. Mills, Chicago, Ill.

Reply, by Mr. Frank Earnest:—1. There is plenty of good land open for homestead entry in the Western part of the United States.

2. Yes, there are advantages and privileges given ex-soldiers.

3. Registry fee for less than eighty-one acres and ten dollars for more than that. Also a commission of one dollar for each forty-acre tract outside a railroad grant and two dollars inside of railroad grants.

4. Write to the Department of the Interior, General Land Office, Denver, Colorado and ask for Circulars Nos. 541, 523, 302, and 1159 and also for the Booklet "Colorado, The North-West Plateau." These circulars will be sent you free of charge and will give you complete information regarding homesteading.

My personal opinion is that the best land for homestead purposes is in Routt and Moffat Counties, Colorado and Uinta County, Utah.

Coins

SILVER dollars at an interesting premium.

Request:—"I would like to know the names and addresses of any one from whom I can buy silver dollars of 1804, 1870, also 1838.

Are there still any places where they pay their cowboys with these silver dollars?"

—Edward C. Waldeyer, New York, N. Y.

Reply, by Mr. Howland Wood:—I am herewith enclosing a list of dealers to whom you may write. The dollar of 1804 would cost you anywhere from $1,000 to $3,000. The 1838 dollar would cost anywhere from $80 to $150, according to variety. The 1870 dollar as far as I know has no especial premium. Since the war the use of silver dollars has been somewhat restricted and not as many have been used as in other days. Nevertheless, I think that some are paid out in the South, Southwest, and West to this day.

South Sea

OUTLOOK for trading venture in the South Pacific islands.

Request:—"I intend to acquire in the near future, a two-masted Diesel motored schooner and trade throughout the world. I expect to confine my activities principally to South Sea and Asiatic waters for the most part, and therefore would thank you for the following information

1. General information on trading.
2. Pearls and pearling, markets, etc.
3. Natives. Methods of handling and dealing with them.
4. Traders. Types of men. Relations existing between them.
5. Boats. Types used for trading.
6. Where can I acquire accurate maps and charts of South Sea waters and islands? Winds, currents, reefs, islands and etc.?"

—MR. ELWOOD W. COOPER, Chico, Cal.

Reply, by Mr. James S. Meagher:—1. Conditions vary to a great extent in regard to trading and such matters in the South Seas. As a general rule the prospects are not promising for one unacquainted with the prevailing methods and customs in practice in this business. Competition is keen and it is difficult if not impossible to compete in favorable trading localities with the old hands at the game. As a matter of fact there is little or no opportunity for trading in some of the better known island groups. In this connection I may give a few instances by way of illustration:

Samoa—In American Samoa the production and handling of copra is now under Government supervision and they oversee the production and marketing of the crop, which condition supersedes the old trading methods in disposing of the product.

French Oceania (Tahiti and other Society Islands, Tuamotus, etc.) Owing to the decline in native population and the advent of foreign planters, the trading business has become more or less a thing of the past. Marquesas—The population of the far Marquesas is very small and trade of any kind is very little. Cook Islands—Similar condition exists here. At Rarotonga there are two trading schooners which seem to be ample for what trade there is in Rarotonga and the outer islands. The schooners go north in December and return about March to escape the hurricane season. They are idle for a large part of the time. Conditions in other of the better known groups do not offer much inducement for additional trading enterprises. Many people have an erroneous idea of large trading profits in the South Seas derived mostly from accounts which refer to days gone by when conditions were much different from the present.

Trading as it was done in bygone days may still be approximated to some extent in areas where the islands are still remote and but very slightly under the influence of modern civilization.

Such groups as the Solomons, New Hebrides, etc, may be said to be in this category and there is still opportunity in islands such as these to obtain profitable cargoes.

I hesitate however to give much encouragement, as trading expeditions of various kinds, with the South Seas as their goal, are both risky and problematical ventures. The business on the whole is much overdone.

The South Sea Islands are no doubt ideal spots through which one may cruise at leisure with the idea of pleasure and adventure as the main ends in view, but in my opinion there is little opportunity to make money.

2. There is not the slightest opportunity of success for a stranger coming to French Oceania to operate a pearling schooner. All vessels engaged in trading must be registered under the French flag and only French citizens may dive for pearls.

Pearls are purchased almost wholly by representatives of large Parisian jewelers. Pearl shell is purchased only by large and well established Papeete trading concerns.

The business is risky and requires considerable capital and can be learned only by experience.

In the Cook Islands pearling is carried on to some extent in the northern islands of the group, Penryhn and Manihiki. The lagoons in these islands are pretty well worked out.

In other areas pearling offers few opportunities for the newcomer on account of the competition, restrictions and conditions to be met with.

3. In regard to dealing with the natives I may say that it is practically impossible to get along with them without some knowledge of their languages. You must also savvy native ways and customs and this can only be learned by experience.

4. Characters to be met with in the trading business in the far archipelagos are mostly of the adventurous type. They are men who have spent years in the South Pacific as a general rule.

No doubt some of them are holdovers from the old days when ruthless men and ruthless methods were common. In these days however the business is on a commercial basis and the old days are rapidly becoming a memory. Too much law and order coming into the South Seas to allow anything except legitimate methods of trade. In some of the little known groups however conditions and methods more nearly approximate the old style trading business, and replicas of the old trading captains are met with from time to time.

In some of the remote islands, which are far off the regular steamship routes, and which are seldom visited by any kind of ship, a man might meet with any kind of fate and the fact be unknown for months, if ever.

Keen rivalry exists in favorable trading areas and there is bound to be antagonism towards any newcomer.

5. The usual type of craft used by traders is the schooner, two-masted with mainsail, foresail, jib sails, topsails, etc., and equipped with auxiliary power. Average 80 to 110 tons, with smaller craft used in inter-island trade.

6. The U. S. Hydrographic Office can supply you with all charts, sailing directions and Pilot Books, at nominal cost.

Mephitis Mephitica

IN A WORD, skunk. How the trapper handles him.

Request:—"I am writing to you for some information about skunk trapping.

1. What is the best method of getting skunks out of their dens after they have hibernated?

2. Is it advisable to shoot them as they come out?

3. Is there any smoker that will bring them out?

4. I have noticed while tramping about the woods a thick oily scum on dead stagnant water and have also noticed it on a slow moving stream that flowed out of a muskeg swamp. Is this an indication of mineral oil, or is it merely oil from vegetation?"
—X. Y., Duluth, Minn.

Reply, by Mr. Victor Shaw:—1. If you merely wish to exterminate skunks, the best method is to use a poison gas in their dens—if you can find them. A heavy chemical gas is used, such as cyanogas, made by the American Cyanamid Sales Co., 511 Fifth Ave., N. Y. C. It is in powder form and when it is sprinkled around the den mouth, the fumes travel down underground and kill everything in the den. There is an artificial "smoke" marketed which is used by bee men which might be used as you wish. It is blown from an instrument like a large atomizer by a bellows. Some States have a law against the use of all poisons for any sort of wild animal. You would do well to look it up.

2. I wouldn't advise shooting a skunk at any time. He will fill the whole neighborhood with his scent.

3. If you care to preserve the pelt of the skunk and run no risk of scenting yourself, you can set a trap at the den mouth or near it. Set trap in usual manner with a bait of meat, fish, or even ripe fruit. Near the trap arrange also a spring-pole twitch-up and fasten to your steel trap in such manner that when trap is sprung the twitch-up is also released. This swings the skunk into the air and holds him dangling. He can not use his defense glands and the pole may be cut down and by carrying the animal to water, it may be drowned without the slightest danger or scenting of the fur. Skunk trappers employ this method.

4. Many marshy areas and swamps collect an iridescent film on the surface of the water, which may look oily, but which contains no trace of petroleum. Such a film is composed of limonite, an oxide of iron. Of course, it is possible the particular scum you have noted *may* be the mineral oil seeping from some underground pool. There are two very simple tests which you may apply:

1. When the film is disturbed, natural oil will hang together since it is cohesive; whereas, limonite film breaks up readily into sharp irregular patches.
2. Try to light it with a match. Limonite will not burn.

Our Experts—They have been chosen by us not only for their knowledge and experience but with an eye to their integrity and reliability. We have emphatically assured each of them that his advice or information is not to be affected in any way by whether a commodity is or is not advertised in this magazine.

They will in all cases answer to the best of their ability, using their own discretion in all matters pertaining to their sections, subject only to our general rules for "Ask Adventure," but neither they nor the magazine assume any responsibility beyond the moral one of trying to do the best that is possible.

1. **Service**—It is free to anybody, provided self-addressed envelop and *full* postage, *not attached*, are enclosed. Correspondents writing to or from foreign countries will please enclose International Reply Coupons, purchasable at any post-office, and exchangeable for stamps of any country in the International Postal Union. Be sure that the issuing office stamps the coupon in the left-hand circle.

2. **Where to Send**—Send each question direct to the expert in charge of the particular section whose field covers it. He will reply by mail. DO NOT send questions to this magazine.

3. **Extent of Service**—No reply will be made to requests for partners, for financial backing, or for chances to join expeditions. "Ask Adventure" covers business and work opportunities, but only if they are outdoor activities, and only in the way of general data and advice. It is in no sense an employment bureau.

4. **Be Definite**—Explain your case sufficiently to guide the expert you question.

See next page for complete list of the "Ask Adventure" experts

Salt and Fresh Water Fishing *Fishing-tackle and equipment; fly and bait casting; bait; camping-outfits; fishing-trips.*—John B. Thompson ("Ozark Ripley"), care *Adventure.*

Small Boating *Skiff, outboard, small launch river and lake cruising.*—Raymond S. Spears, Inglewood, California.

Canoeing *Paddling, sailing, cruising; equipment and accessories, clubs, organizations, official meetings, regattas.*—Edgar S. Perkins, Copeland Manor, Libertyville, Illinois.

Yachting Henry W. Rubinkam, Chicago Yacht Club, Box 507, Chicago, Ill.

Motor Boating George W. Sutton, 232 Madison Ave., Room 801, New York City.

Motor Camping John D. Long, 610 W. 116th St., New York City.

Motor Vehicles *Operation, legislative restrictions and Traffic.*—Edmund B. Neil, care *Adventure.*

Automotive and Aircraft Engines *Design, operation and maintenance.*—Edmund B. Neil, care *Adventure.*

All Shotguns *including foreign and American makes; wing shooting.* John B. Thompson, care *Adventure.*

All Rifles, Pistols and Revolvers *including foreign and American makes.*—Donegan Wiggins, R. F. D. 3 Box 75, Salem, Ore.

Edged Weapons, *pole arms and armor.*—Robert E. Gardner, 835 Gladden Road, Grandview, Columbus, Ohio.

First Aid on the Trail *Medical and surgical emergency care, wounds, injuries, common illnesses, diet, pure water, clothing, insect and snake bite; industrial first aid and sanitation for mines, logging camps, ranches and exploring parties as well as for camping trips of all kinds. First-aid outfits. Health hazard of the outdoor life, arctic, temperate and tropical zones.*—Claude P. Fordyce, M. D., Falls City, Neb.

Health-Building Outdoors *How to get well and how to keep well in the open air, where to go and how to travel, right exercise, food and habits, with as much adaptation as possible to particular cases.*—Claude P. Fordyce.

Hiking Claude P. Fordyce, M. D., Falls City, Neb.

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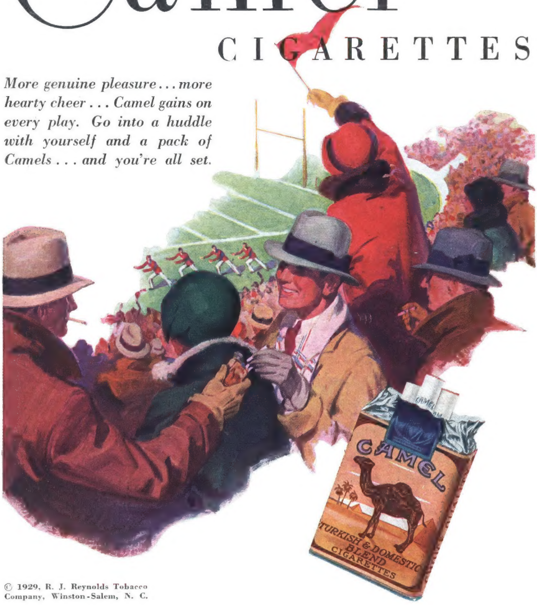
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